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STALIN PRIZE WINNER



SELECTED STORIES



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow

1922

DESIGNED BY E. KOGAN

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THE COCKALORUM

A WEEK IN TURENEVO

I

AUNTIE Anna Mikhailovna always kept a plateful of bread-crumbs soaked in milk under her washstand so that the mice would not eat the soap; and under no circumstances would Auntie allow mousetraps to be brought into the house; apropos of a mouse she would say:

"It's a living creature, after all, you put it into a trap but suppose the trap goes bang across its belly."

Apart from the washstand Auntie's bedroom was furnished with chiffoniers in the corners—on one of them there was a watch stand with great-grandfather's watch on it—over the bed hung a tapestry depicting two borzoi hounds and on a bedside table there was a small round box full of cigarettes.

Auntie smoked a cheap, strong tobacco which she thought was not injurious to the health. She loved to go out on to the porch, light a cigarette, and gaze at the greyish poplars beyond the pond and at the blue smoke curling over the village.

Her bedroom door opened into a broad, low passage where the servants' rooms used to be in the old days; at the end a spiral staircase led to the nine rooms above that were once occupied by the owner's family; nobody ever went there any more and the wooden latticework on the drawing-room walls that had once been covered with plush, the huge, cavelike fireplaces, the tall bookcases in the library, the tables and chairs piled on top of each other in the corner—everything was cov-

ered with a thick layer of dust, for in all these rooms wheat lay a couple of feet thick on the floors and the mice reigned supreme.

Sometimes in the night the beams would crack under the weight of the grain and Auntie, in a petticoat, her hair in a bun on top of her head, would take a candle to see which beam had cracked.

They were used to noises in that house, however. Old, ailing Daryushka, the housekeeper, would only cross herself sleepily in the kitchen, believing that it was Pyotr Petrovich's ghost, the mistress' great-grandfather, clumping about the house—the old man whose portrait showed him on crutches, in a brightly-coloured dressing gown, his eyebrows grown together over the bridge of his nose—in general he looked like a bird of prey.

Pyotr Petrovich's was probably not the only ghost who strode about the house on autumn nights, up to his knees in wheat; there were many who looked with sorrow on the now deserted manor house at Turenevo that had once been so full of life; but there was nobody left to scare, nobody to complain to. . . .

All were dead and gone, and had taken their pleasures, their riches and their unfulfilled dreams into the cold earth with them and that lonely old soul, Auntie Anna Mikhailovna, the last of them, lived all alone in the spacious Turennev Manor House. Every evening she used to go out to watch the mist rise from the water meadows beyond the Volga and then creep across and enshroud the garden, the columned summerhouse and the bit of rope hanging from the swing until it came right up to the porch.

With her hands thrust into the pockets of a straight, grey jacket, Auntie would walk along the selfsame avenue every night. Her cigarette would go out and stay out. It would get too dark to see the trees—time to go to bed.

Auntie would go to her bedroom, break up bread for the mice, say her prayers and get into bed; she would not fall

asleep immediately but would lie awake a long time, thinking of the past—the faces of loved ones long since passed away arose before her, or she would think of the sins she had committed that day or of her only nephew, the unfortunate Nikolushka, and wonder what he was doing. Or she lay thinking, racking her brains about how she was to meet her bills. This business of making ends meet had been her chief occupation since girlhood.

This evening, before Anna Mikhailovna had time to get into bed, she heard the sound of carriage bells approaching. Auntie listened.

"Who can be coming here so late? It can't be Afrikan Ilyich? But, then, who else could it be?"

Slipping on an old skirt (she had no other, for on Sundays anybody could ask Auntie for anything they wanted, and a whole week before the village women would plan to get one of her better skirts from her), Anna Mikhailovna went down to the kitchen but to her astonishment found none of the girls who lived in the house without anything special to do; a tall, round-shouldered man in a long, brown traveling coat was already in the doorway. He came in and began shaking off the dust which is so thick and abundant in the trans-Volga area, that when a traveler arrives one cannot tell whether it is a Negro or just simply the devil himself.

When he had wiped his face the man actually did turn out to be Afrikan Ilyich, whose skin was naturally a dark brown. Bending over Auntie's hand, he said in a jolly tone:

"Here I am, Your Excellency."

Anna Mikhailovna kissed the close-cropped round head of which Afrikan Ilyich was so proud; "Now that's a head, not the sort the young people of today have," he used to say. Fearing to show a pleasure that was not proper towards a man tired from a journey, Auntie merely said to him:

"It is good that you have come, Afrikan Ilyich, we'll have the samovar ready in a minute. Those girls of mine are a nuisance, they run around at nights."

"Not a bad idea, the samovar," said Afrikan Ilyich in a grating voice; he went into the dining room where he cast a look of satisfaction at the unusual sideboard shaped like a Noah's Ark, at the sleeping flies on the wall and at the glass of warm kvass on the window sill. Everything was the same as it had always been.

Auntie brought in plates of food, opened and closed the doors of the sideboard, fussed around helplessly, panting breathlessly until Afrikan Ilyich shouted to her:

"Sit down, Your Excellency! There are those four silly girls sitting in the kitchen and you are fussing around. . . ."

Auntie immediately sat down with a sweet smile which gave her oval, lined face a look of tenderness.

"I have some news," said Afrikan Ilyich. "I will tell you as soon as I have eaten."

He poured half the vodka from his glass into his cupped palms, rubbed his hands on a napkin until it became as black as soot, drank up the other half glass, cleared his throat and bit at a pickled mushroom. Auntie's mushrooms were wonderful.

"What's the news?" asked Auntie. "Is it something about Nikolushka?"

Afrikan Ilyich, however, started telling her an interesting story that he had just read in a newspaper, he ate and drank between the words, dragging them out to their full length while Auntie looked into his eyes as she listened patiently, smiling thoughtfully and wondering whom the news was about. When Afrikan Ilyich had finished his story and began describing the Zemstvo Congress at Melekes, how much they had drunk there, Auntie asked cautiously:

"My friend, when are you going to tell me about what you promised?"

Afrikan Ilyich frowned terribly.

"Tomorrow Nikolai and Nastasia are coming. That's the news for you."

"Lord Jesus!" Auntie crossed herself.

"They did not want to come with me in the carriage. They are coming by rail, first class. We must send a carriage to meet them. . . ."

"However did they consent?" exclaimed Auntie. "They never wanted to come, no matter how often I wrote."

"Didn't want to?" Afrikan Ilyich snorted and refilled his glass. "Didn't want to? They don't want to die of hunger! Nastasia pawned all her jewels and lost the whole lot at cards in a fortnight and in the meantime Nikolushka spent his time in the bar drinking champagne. They have squandered everything to the last thread!"

"How did you manage to persuade them, Afrikan Ilyich?"

"It was quite simple—I bought the railway tickets, Your Excellency. They had about twenty-five rubles left in cash, no more, and they owed money on all sides, at the hotel, at the tailor's and in restaurants. (Auntie began crossing herself frequently.) I told them I would hold the hotel bill and settle it as soon as they were in the railway carriage. They argued that they would be in your way, besides they are not married, it would not be proper, and so on. I said to Nikolai: you fool, Auntie has written a hundred times to tell you that if that Nastasia loves you and will give up her former life then she will be a daughter to Auntie and a wife to you. I was fed up to the teeth with them and went away first. . . . They came yesterday, straight to Krasnov's Hotel. . . . In short, Your Excellency, although everything is as you wished I consider the whole business nonsense. . . ."

"My friend, it is not nonsense," said Auntie, hurriedly interrupting him. "Nikolushka is honest by nature. (Afrikan Ilyich did not object but scratched the back of his cropped head vigorously.) And Nastasia's heart is not in this noisy life, that's obvious if she agrees to give up Moscow and go with him to some poor old aunt. That's how I understand it. . . . The only

thing I'm afraid of is that it will be dull for them here after the capital.... Well, I'll do the best I can...."

"Why exert yourself? I suggest that you don't," cried Afrikan Ilyich. "It'll be enough if you feed them...."

Auntie lowered her eyes and blushed.

"Don't be angry with me, my friend, let's do the best we can for them," she said softly but finally.

Afrikan Ilyich took Auntie's plump and wrinkled hand, raised it to his bristling lips and kissed it.

"You are a wonderful woman, Your Excellency."

II

As usual Auntie awoke before dawn, lit a candle and began pacing softly up and down the bare boards of her room that had seemed quite strong the day before but were now creaking loudly; she stopped short, afraid that her crazy running to and fro would awaken the whole house.

In order to fill in the time until breakfast she dusted the gold and silver frames of the old icons; since childhood she had been afraid to look at the family icon, a miraculous Redeemer, painted in dark colours with inflexible eyes, in a gem-studded embossed frame. She went through her box of papers with locks of hair belonging to the dear departed. She experienced some painful memories as she hid away a heavy, bone toothpick case. She remembered an old frame amongst her souvenirs, but could not find it.

All these old heirlooms talked in their own pensive language to Auntie Anna Mikhailovna, the youngest and the last of them. Of all her old things the one that Auntie probably loved best of all was the wide, red armchair, upholstered in cloth, with a spring sticking out of it. Auntie and her nine now deceased sisters had all been nursed in that chair.

"So the trial has come," thought Anna Mikhailovna, sitting

down in the chair, "shall I have the strength to turn such fly-by-nights on to the path of truth? Nastyenka, she is probably easier to deal with—she lived in sin, fell in love and that purified her soul. She abandoned her rich admirers and sold up her property, that means she had fallen in love. But Nikolenka, he's the trump card. Calls for champagne when he hasn't a farthing in his pocket. Just try and teach him to work. I don't want work, he'll say, give me pigeon's milk. I'll have to introduce him to our priest, let them talk together. Father Ivan is a man of great moral strength. I mustn't put it off, as soon as they come I must call Father Ivan."

Auntie was excited and could not sit still, so she went out into the passage where it was cooler.

The lamp hanging from an iron ring in the ceiling was turned down low but was still burning. Through a half-open door she could hear Afrikan Ilyich's snore, as loud as though a bumblebee were in his nose. Dark-eyed Mashutka, Auntie's favourite, was sleeping on a trunk, her knees uncovered and one thin arm hanging down.

"She's tossing about so," whispered Auntie, bending over her dusky face and straightening the patchwork quilt that had fallen off her. The girl's eyelashes cast a shadow on her cheek and her childish mouth was half open.

"Such a beauty, the Lord be with you..." Auntie stood meditating. Suddenly her legs gave way from under her in fear. "But no," she thought and shook her head in the darkness of the passage, "I will not let you come to any harm..."

Upstairs the mice were running about in the wheat. She wanted her tea. But dawn was only just breaking. Auntie went back to her room and lit a cigarette; she was thinking hard all the time and blinking quite a lot.

A hard day had begun. Mashutka, who had been sent up on to the roof to keep a lookout, reported that "nobody at all was to be seen, except Granddad Fyodor who had a piebald cow tied behind his cart."

Afrikan Ilyich came in to breakfast, tired-looking and angry. He sat sideways on his chair, sipped his tea, sighed and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes.

"Darya!" he called at last.

"Daryushka's down in the cellar, I'll go and give orders myself."

"What orders will you give? You don't even know what orders to give, Your Excellency."

"Horses..." said Auntie softly. "You are tired, my friend, and you are coughing. I think I will go to the station myself. I assure you, it will even be good for me to get out into the fresh air. I sit here all the time, a regular home-bird."

Afrikan Ilyich thrust out his jaw and fixed his bearlike eye on the quiet, but not timid Auntie; there is no knowing how the dispute would have ended had not a carriage suddenly arrived at the house.

Everybody hurried out on to the porch. Afrikan Ilyich, a cigarette in his mouth and one eye screwed up, stood there with his hands in his pockets; behind his back four bareheaded girls in red blouses stood whispering; Auntie, her narrow shoulders shuddering as though from cold, was smiling kindly, her eyes like two narrow slits.

Nikolushka, wearing a long, camel-haired coat, rested a kid-gloved hand on the driver's box and climbed heavily out of the carriage; walking with his legs wide apart like a cavalryman he hurried to embrace his aunt.

On a high pile of cushions sat Nastya, a thin, beautiful woman, with a small pale face and eyes like grey glass that always had an air of astonishment about them. Auntie went to the carriage and held out her hand to the young woman.

"At last God has brought us together. Welcome home!"

Nastya, hastily holding up her dress, jumped down on to the grass.

"We had already given you up," said Auntie, leading the newcomers to the rooms that had been prepared for them and from which Mashutka with her two buckets fled in fright.

Afrikan Ilyich was following behind.

"We've been waiting a long time," he said hoarsely, "we waited at breakfast and at lunch. The lunch was a good one, we ate it all up..."

III

Nikolushka walked up and down the room with his heavy cavalryman's gait, flung out his arms and shrugged his shoulders. His rosy face with its full mouth and ridged eyebrows would have been handsome if not for a slight puffiness of his cheeks and his shifty eyes, which were big and grey. He was very verbose and eloquent.

"My soul is a wilderness, my life is twisted and broken. I am bearing the burden of one whom I love, a creature who is helpless and tired. We were on the brink of ruin, Auntie. You have held out your hand to us. Today, within these ancestral walls, I feel a fresh stream of energy. I believe in the future."

Auntie, greatly excited, sat in her armchair. Behind her stood Afrikan Ilyich, puffing clouds of smoke from his cigarette.... Nastyenka was hidden in the shadows behind the bed.

"Auntie, teach me to live, teach me to work and you will save me and this unfortunate woman."

Anna Mikhailovna took Nikolushka by the hand, pulled him down beside her on the chair and for some time did not speak.

"Nikolai," she said at last, "do you know what earth is?"

Nikolushka looked at her in astonishment and bit his lips.

"That's just it, you don't know. In that city of yours you probably never walk on the earth, you walk on stones all

the time. Your forefathers, Nikolushka, never went away from the land. It was quite an occasion when they went to Simbirsk and they never went more than once or twice a year for the elections or to see about a mortgage or a sale, . . . And they were ashamed even to think of boredom or idleness. The earth is your cradle, you came from the earth and to it you should return. . . .”

Sighing deeply, Nikolushka bowed his head. He felt uncomfortable sitting in the same chair with Auntie and, besides, Afrikan Ilyich was smoking strong tobacco close to him.

“Don’t you worry about our estate being ruined, we’ll put all that right. Afrikan Ilyich has that matter in hand and never rests from it for which he deserves the thanks of all our Turennev family. And you can begin with the smaller things, that may be of some help. You can catch crayfish and preserve them, send them to the city—that’s a profitable business. Or you can plant mushrooms, the expensive kinds. Or breed hares: the meat we can use as food and the skins can be sent abroad where they say Russian hares fetch a good price, they make ermine out of them; it’s true what I say, isn’t it, Afrikan Ilyich?”

“Absolutely true, Your Excellency.”

“There’s plenty you can find to do if you only have the will. And in about twenty years our woods will have grown and we’ll be on our feet again. Get down to work, get down to it, my friend—you’ll save the estate and make a man of yourself. There was Solovyov, a philosopher, he was just like you in his youth, did not believe in God but he worked and gained belief. . . .”

At this point Auntie, greatly excited, rose from her chair.

“You will believe in God. It is the fashion nowadays not to believe in God. But I say—there is a God!”

As she said these words Anna Mikhailovna brought her hand down hard on the chest of drawers. Afrikan Ilyich hid himself in a cloud of smoke.

For a time nobody spoke. Then, without warning, the door opened and in walked Priest Ivan—tall, thin as a pole, dressed in a dirty sailcloth surplice; he looked over the newcomers without haste and his huge mouth twisted into a grin, revealing yellow teeth, like those of an old horse, under his thin moustache. His face also had something horsey about it, with a heavy jaw and a long upper lip. The only handsome thing about him was his dark eyes but he deliberately gave them a satirical expression which came more from confusion than derision.

"But," said Priest Ivan, "it's fuggy!" As he said these words his niece Raisa, dressed in a little pink dress, her head a mass of little, blond curls, came gliding into the room for all the world like a pink butterfly.

"That's a gul for you!" said Afrikan Ilyich and coughed heavily.

The guests shook hands—Priest Ivan offering the whole of his leg-of-mutton fist and Raisa the tips of her fingers. They sat down.

"You see, father," began Auntie, "the fledgelings have come flying back to the nest. Nikolushka and his wife have come to us for the whole winter."

"I approve," said Priest Ivan, "but permit me to ask what reasons prompted you to take such an unusual step?"

"Isn't he spiteful," chuckled Afrikan Ilyich.

Nikolushka modestly lowered his eyes and answered that he had come to learn to work.

"Useful," said Priest Ivan, screwing up his eyes and displaying his horse-teeth.

"In fulfilment of Anna Mikhailovna's desires I shall make an attempt to elevate myself once more. See," Nikolushka held out his hands, "I can follow the plough. But eternal night still fills my soul. I know life too well to be able to enjoy anything again."

On hearing these words Raisa opened her little mouth and gazed at Nikolushka like a hypnotized bird. A silence fell,

and suddenly, in the shadow behind the bed, Nastya laughed out loud. Priest Ivan turned his horse-head towards her in surprise, the cigarette trembled on Auntie's lips.

"There's nothing for you to laugh at," exclaimed Nikolushka angrily. "It's idiotic!"

Priest Ivan cleared his throat and began:

"In the course of our conversations, dear Anna Mikhailovna has often expressed the opinion that man, by labour, naturally comes to an understanding of divine providence. I agree but only partly. Last week I was passing along the main road near the place where day labourers were breaking stones. I heard how they were blaspheming and cursing not only the contractor but also the Lord God. Therefore, although I agree with Anna Mikhailovna on the usefulness of labour, I must add—not any kind of labour."

"What a philosopher!" exclaimed Afrikan Ilyich, rolling a cigarette and coughing so hard that he turned a dark red.

"Anna Mikhailovna," came Mashutka's thin voice from outside the door, "supper is served"

IV

After supper Nikolushka went out into the garden that lay dense and damp under the bright moon which lent a melancholy note to the doleful voices of the tree toads. A female, lovelorn, broke into their chorus abruptly and impertinently. The mist settled on the glade that led down to the river and came creeping through the thick grass.

Nikolushka went into a tumbledown summerhouse overlooking a backwater that was filled by the waters of the Volga every spring and, striking a match, scared the doves nesting under the roof.

From here he could see the water meadows with clumps of mist over the bogs, the black mass of willows by the

millpond and far away, high up on the horizon, the long ribbon of the Volga gleaming in places as though covered with fish scales.

Nikolushka breathed in the tang of the grass, the earth and the marsh flowers and recalled the distant past. That which had happened and that which he had probably seen in his dreams as a child merged in sad and lucid recollections.

He remembered how his mother had sat in this summer-house, he recalled her dark dress that smelt of some old, warm perfume, such as no longer existed. This memory was so strong that Nikolushka imagined this forgotten perfume wafted to him through the marshy smell of the buttercups. His mother had put her arms round his shoulders as they watched the moon play on the silver scales of the distant river. Nikolushka had asked in a whisper: "Mamma, is it true what the boys told me, that there is a teeny-weeny little old man living in our garden who sells trained frogs at a kopek each?"

"I don't know, perhaps there is an old man like that here," answered Mamma, and a hot teardrop fell on Nikolushka's cheek.

"Are you crying, Mamma?"

"I don't know, I think I am."

At that moment Nikolushka had seen something on a beam under the roof that was either a bird or a little old man who bent his bird's head down and looked at him.

Nikolushka involuntarily looked up at the roof of the summerhouse. . . . Yes, there was the beam on which he had seen that strange bird in the faraway mist of childhood.

Nikolushka sighed and leaning on the balustrade continued gazing at the hazy outlines of the trees and the sparkling ribbon in the distance. Again he remembered. . . . They were already in town and he was sitting with his feet drawn up on a sofa before the fireplace, watching the yellowish-red flames dance with a slight crackle. Suddenly he heard the doorbell

ring and a lady, her wide silk dress rustling as she walked, crossed the drawing room that was lit only by the fire in the grate. At the door of the study stood his father, a tall thin man with an aquiline nose and deep-sunk eyes.

"How kind of you," he said to the lady in a strange voice that annoyed Nikolushka, "how kind of you." He and the lady disappeared behind the door. Nikolushka's heart beat fast in sweet alarm, he felt drawn towards the door. He heard his father's footsteps, his dull abrupt words and the hurried whispering of the lady.... Something fell on the floor. A silence followed, then a soulful sigh and the sound of a kiss.

Nikolushka clutched at his throat, he wanted to scream, to run away, to hide his head.... In the other door, however, his mother was beckoning to him; she was dressed all in black like a nun, and stood there abandoned, pale, terrible. He was suddenly so sorry for her—he rushed to her and hugged her knees....

"Go away, go away from here, you mustn't listen," said his mother and took Nikolushka away to the bedroom.

In the bedroom there was a whole wall covered with icons lit up by several wax candles and before them a low stool with a high back on which to rest the forehead—here his mother would spend hours on her knees at prayer. If you touched her dress stealthily with a finger you could feel iron chains under it.

"Never, do you hear me, never must you eavesdrop," whispered his mother impetuously, "your father is a passionate, big-hearted man, it is not for you to judge him."

She made Nikolushka kneel beside her and he watched the long, fat, yellow flames of the candles. The room smelt of wax and medicines, it was warm, dreamy and boring....

In this way Nikolushka grew up between the icons and the study, where he would run in secretly to gaze fearfully but eagerly at the portrait of a beautiful lady in a mahogany

frame, to touch the strange knickknacks on the writing desk and to smell the sharp, astounding odour of a cigar butt.

One day Nikolushka picked up a lady's glove from the carpet and in a fit of incomprehensible excitement kissed it and hid it under his jacket.

Very, very often in the dreams he would see a narrow, empty street bathed in a pale light and in the distance the figure of a beautiful woman. . . . He would run after her, leap into the air, and with swiftly moving legs would fly over the sidewalk. His heart would beat fast, it would miss a beat but the figure would slip farther and farther away and there was no overtaking it.

Nikolushka sighed loudly. A dove, brushing against the branches flew from under the roof. Somewhere close at hand he could hear the voices of Auntie, Nastya and Raisa.

V

"I was absolutely stunned by the way he spoke," Nikolushka heard Raisa's thin voice saying. "Ah, Anna Mikhailovna, you know I haven't seen much but I found it so interesting . . . so interesting. . . . Especially when he said: 'I have tried everything in life, but eternal night still fills my soul. . . .' something seemed to snap in my heart."

Nikolushka watched the women walk up to a bench. Auntie and Nastya sat down while slender Raisa remained standing, looking at the distant light in the window.

"Lately my heart has been in a flutter all the time," she continued, "and to tell the truth Uncle Vanya has grown awfully grumpy. At night he reads, walks about, makes a lot of noise. . . . Or else he begins to talk terribly loud—I listen and listen and then the tears come. Ours is a miserable life."

Auntie laughed, drew Raisa towards her, kissed her and sat the girl down alongside her.

"You're all so good, Anna Mikhailovna. . . . But I was more sorry for Nikolai Mikhailovich today than for anybody else. . . ."

"Mind you don't fall in love," said Nastya with a snigger.

Auntie immediately began in her businesslike manner.

"Come on to bed, Nastyenka, you are sneezing already. And you too, Raisa, off you go to bed."

"Anna Mikhailovna, I would like to sit here a little longer, it is very nice here. Uncle Vanya will call me when it is time to go home. May I?"

Auntie laughed again, kissed her and went away with Nastya.

With weary steps Nikolushka came out of the summerhouse. Raisa saw him, gasped, started to rise from the bench but sat down again.

"Are you admiring the night?" said Nikolushka sitting down beside the girl and resting his chin on his walking stick. "God grant that you may never know sorrow. How I envy your youth. How many beautiful dreams you still have ahead of you! You long for a beautiful life and are afraid—can it be that it too will collapse and fall into the mire?" He stole a glance at Raisa. She was sitting and nibbling a birch leaf, her eyes lowered. . . .

"Tell me about your life," whispered Raisa in a scarcely audible voice.

"Tell you about my life? . . . All the filth I have been through, all the vices with which I wasted away my youth? No, you must not hear such things. What I need now is the sympathy of a chaste and pure woman to save, perhaps, to preserve the remnants of my living soul."

"Good Lord, what are you saying?"

"Look at this moonlight—that beauty is not for me. I am twenty-eight years old but my life is over."

He lowered his head. From the house came Nastya's voice: "Nikolai, come to bed. . . ."

Nikolushka raised his head and smiled bitterly.

"There it is, the millstone round my neck. What have I in store—naturally a downward rush head first to the bottom. Farewell."

He took Raisa's tiny, cold hand, squeezed it, shook his head hopelessly and walked towards the house along a path that lay patchy in the moonlight.

Just then Raisa was also called in. Father Ivan led her through the old churchyard and across the field, making a beeline for home; he walked with his arms swinging, his head bowed, snorting disgustedly.

"What were you talking about to that, what's his name?..." he asked.

"Nikolai Mikhailovich is so unfortunate."

"Aha, and you wept, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the sort. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Uncle Vanya, to laugh at him. You teach us to love people and yet you speak ill of them yourself."

"What ill did I speak? I did not say a word about him."

"Words are not needed."

"You don't understand anything," said Father Ivan, opening the gate of a garden overgrown with gillyflowers. "You don't understand anything..." He stopped short and gazed towards the smoking meadows beyond the huge sleeping poplars, the crescent of the moon reflected in the water, and the fleecy night clouds that were racing across the sky before dawn like a flock of sheep. "There is nothing, Raisa, that you understand."

Auntie Anna Mikhailovna, screwing up her eyes in the tobacco smoke, stood in the room that had been made ready for the young people before two huge leather trunks, the last remnants of Nikolushka's better days, and thought how good it would be to burn it all.

"With what money was it bought? Rags, paint and powder, nothing but dirt, you will start a new life here..."

"So you have found the tramp," she said to Nastyia who came in from the garden with Nikolushka. "And the nights, such wonderful nights we have here. Especially in flood time, you just can't leave the balcony until dawn."

Auntie bid them good night, kissed them both, made the sign of the cross over them and was about to leave the room when she suddenly asked:

"What is there in those trunks?"

"In this there are evening and party dresses and in the other shoes, hats and Nikolushka's things."

"And what do you want with all that now?" asked Auntie. "Will you get dressed up here? You should burn all those things, now shouldn't you, eh? We can alter your grandfather's frock coat for you, Nikolushka, and for you, Nastyenka, we can remake a few silk dresses, we can find some old ones here—in fact we can find a lot of things. Oh, well, all right, go to bed, we'll talk about it another time..."

Auntie left the room smiling guiltily. Nastyenka locked the door behind her and with her hands on her hips, a favourite attitude, walked up to Nikolai.

"What do you mean by it," she began, "trying to turn that girl's head? D'you think I don't know how you wept on her shoulder? I know all your foul tricks." she poked him in the forehead with her finger, "that, my dear, is something I will not allow in a decent house."

"Don't you dare poke me in the forehead," said Nikolushka gloomily.

"If you like I'll scratch that ugly mug of yours for you..."

Nikolushka retreated behind the bed and seeing Nastyenka advancing towards him suddenly shouted out in a loud voice:

"Listen, if you don't stop it at once I'll call Auntie."

VI

Auntie was seated on a high stool before a writing desk going over the accounts in thick books that had been started some fifteen years before by her late brother Aggei.

Brother Aggei had been uncommonly lazy and usually spent whole days here beside the writing desk lying on the sofa; he either did nothing at all or read Alexander Dumas' *Vicomte de Bragelonne* and when he got to the end he seemed to have forgotten the beginning and started reading the book over again. If anybody who had come on business should happen to tap at the little window cut into the office wall while he was thus engaged, Aggei would turn over heavily so that the sofa springs creaked and would say:

"What do you want, anyway. Why don't you go to the steward, you can see I'm busy?..."

Today, contrary to her usual practice, Auntie was not paying much attention to her computations and made mistakes.

"A hundred and twenty-three rubles, sixteen kopeks," holding the pen between her teeth she checked the figures off on an abacus, "sixteen kopeks. Oh, good God, what will it all come to?"

At this moment five peasants, clumping with their heavy boots and removing their hats, came into the office; they were old friends of Auntie's. She put down her pen and greeted them affably.

"Well, what's the good news, men?"

"It's like this," said one of them, a bald-headed, puffy-faced peasant, "we have come to you. Anna Mikhailovna," he groaned and looked at his companions.

"If it's about the meadows, men, I have made my last offer. I can't take any less; well, perhaps I can come down three rubles, if you like..."

"No, it's not about the meadows," the first man said again.

"we'll stand by what we decided about the meadows, we don't want to swindle you.... We've come about this...."

He stopped, hesitated and the others also began to hem and haw.

"Whatever are you talking about, I can't understand you?"

"Our fellows are getting out of hand, they're going to set fire to property, Anna Mikhailovna."

"Whose property?"

"Yours, Anna Mikhailovna. That's why we have come to visit Your Honour. Don't be offended—but we're going to burn you up this week."

"That's true," the other peasants chimed in, "that's already been decided: on Friday or Saturday we shall set fire to Anna Mikhailovna's."

Auntie leaned on the writing desk wrapt in thought. The peasants were clearing their throats. One of them stepped forward, lifted up the skirt of his drab, homespun coat and wiped his nose on it.

"Will you burn the barns or the house?" asked Auntie at last.

"The house? God forbid, the barns of course."

The oldest of the peasants, Granddad Spiridon, leaning on his long staff, stared at Auntie with eyes watery from inflamed eyelids. His hair was quite white and his thin neck was bound round a dozen times with a woollen scarf.

"I used to go hunting with your daddy, Mikhail Petrovich," he began in a cracked, thin voice, "your daddy killed a wolf. Sometimes he would say: 'Spiridon, get me a horse, the fastest you can find'.... He would leap into the saddle and away.... Yes, I remember it all," he smacked his purple lips, "and your granddad, Pyotr Mikhailovich.... I remember them all...."

"Come and have some tea with me some time, Spiridon," said Auntie kindly, "we haven't had a heart-to-heart talk for a long time...."

"I'll come, I'll come, Anna Mikhailovna.... Now, Mikhail Mikhailovich, your great-granddad, I don't remember him...."

"Why do you want to cause me this unpleasantness, men." sighed Auntie and ran her pencil along the middle of the book, "what wrong have I done you?"

"D'you think we'd have thought of it ourselves," said the peasants; "last week some papers came to the village and the fellows read them—and now they are all wrought up. In them it said that we ought to burn up the masters."

After this they talked about the meadows, about hay-making, about the ploughing for next year until the peasants said good-bye and went away leaving a strong smell of sheepskins and home-grown tobacco behind them. Auntie continued sitting at her desk lost in gloomy thought. When Afrikan Ilyich came in, looking tired and with his waistcoat unbuttoned, she told him quietly what the peasants had been to see her about.

"Let them burn down the barns, they're insured," answered Afrikan Ilyich, yawning broadly.

"The barns don't worry me, my friend, but the attitude."

"The peasants have been led to this by your goodness, Your Excellency, yes, I will go to the District Police Officer immediately."

"Don't go, please, Afrikan Ilyich."

"Excuse me, but I will go."

"I ask you, please don't go."

Then Afrikan Ilyich planted his feet firmly apart and began to shout at Her Excellency. Nevertheless he did not go. Auntie had the last word: "You can't ruin a living being for the sake of rotten straw," she said and asked him to call Mashutka to the office.

Mashutka came running in and stood beside Auntie, placing her sun-tanned hand on the writing desk.

"Did you call me, Auntie?"

"Listen," said Anna Mikhailovna, patting her hand, "you understand that God always knows who tells the truth and who lies, and He punishes those that tell untruths."

"I'll always remember it," answered Mashutka merrily.

"So you do know—and how do you behave?"

"When had I lied, Auntie?"

"Of course you haven't told a lie. But listen.... What did you talk to the young master about this morning? Eh?"

Mashutka lowered her eyes and scratched the writing desk with her fingernail.

"Nikolai Mikhailovich asked me how old I was...."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Sixteen...."

"And what else?"

"He asked me if I had a silk shawl...."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I told him I hadn't."

"Well, listen," said Auntie sternly, "the young master likes joking with you.... Don't you bother him, don't cross his path too often. Understand?"

Anna Mikhailovna closed the books, told Mashutka to go and sat for a long time shaking her head and looking through the window at the sparrows fluttering and twittering in the lilacs outside. "I'm going to have a hard job with them all," she thought.

As Anna Mikhailovna was leaving the office she collided with Nikolushka in the doorway:

"Auntie, for God's sake give me some work to do...." he said in the voice of a convalescent.

"What work can I give you, young man? Rest a bit first and eat your fill...."

"I see you have a library upstairs.... I could start by putting that in order."

"You'll be doing me a favour, my friend, and I thank you in advance. Your grandfather always wanted to sort out the books.... I'll send people to help you right away," and Auntie went away in high spirits to make arrangements about the help.

VII

There was wheat on the library floor a couple of feet thick; thick dust covered the bookcases, the windows and the cornices; trails made by mice led in all directions on the table tops.

Matvei, the coachman, and the girls shovelled the wheat out of the library into the drawing room. They raised thick clouds of dust that turned their faces grey; the startled mice scuttled over the sweet-smelling grain; little pink baby mice trembled in the nests that were laid open; a frightened dove circled under the ceiling, brushing its wings against the broken chandelier.

"That will do," said Nikolushka, wiping his perspiring face. "sweep up now and go."

They opened the library windows and the evening air, smelling of the fields, flooded the musty room. Standing on a stepladder, Nikolushka opened the narrow glass doors of the first bookcase—the remnants of mouse-eaten books floated lightly to the floor.

"Oh!" shouted Mashutka, brushing the paper fragments from her clothes.

Nikolushka turned round and saw the girl standing under the stepladder looking covertly at the young master.

"What are you doing here?" asked Nikolushka and seizing the chewed-up paper threw it at Mashutka. "Did you see that?"

"We've only just swept up, sir, and you're making a mess again," said Mashutka tossing back her plait.

"Let me brush you down."

He moved down a couple of steps, bent over, ruffled Mashutka's hair and chucked her lightly under her round chin.

"I'll tell the mistress," said Mashutka in a whisper but did not move away.

Nikolushka laughed and, opening a second bookcase where the mice had not been, with some difficulty pulled out a book bound in yellow, gold-embossed leather.

"What are you going to do with the books?" asked Mashutka.

"I'm going to read them, silly, here, listen: *The Seven Secrets of Nature* by Eckharthausen. And there is the *Travels of Anacharsis the Younger*. Understand? And here," Nikolushka came down the ladder and sat on the bottom step, "*Neonila or the Profligate Daughter*."

"What's that?"

"Listen. . . 'Having ruined the noble cavalier Vicomte de Zarnaut with her cruel profligacy, she vainly continued intrigues as disgusting to men as to the Creator who made this despicable creature'. . ."

Mashutka looked at a picture of Neonila lying face-down in bed without her shift, and beside her a chambermaid preparing the apparatus for relieving the stomach while in the door stood the Chevalier de Zarnaut; she moved nearer and breathed on Nikolushka's cheek. . .

"' . . . but the wanton was possessed of such perfect beauty,'" continued Nikolushka, "'that no mortal could resist her allurements. . .'"

Mashutka was breathing so close to him and her plait of hair touched Nikolushka's cheek so gently that, looking into her innocent eyes he pulled her towards him and kissed her on her half-open, cool lips.

It so happened that Auntie, wishing to let some fresh air into the dusty drawing room, opened the balcony door and as she came in saw Mashutka leaning back with her hands on Nikolushka's shoulders and he intoxicated with the kiss;

the books lay scattered on the floor around them. Auntie screamed.... Mashutka gasped and fled. Nikolushka began to rub his nose energetically.

"Nikolai!" exclaimed Auntie walking excitedly up and down the library. "I took Masha into my house to work and am entirely responsible for her, she's sixteen years old, understand? ... I know you are young and your blood boils. Mashutka is beautiful. ... But what do you want, isn't one woman enough for you? How did you manage to fix yourself up like this? Swear on the cross, this very minute," and Auntie pulled a bunch of little icons and crosses out of her blouse, "swear on the cross that you will never touch Mashutka again! I will not let you go until you give me your word of honour!"

Nikolushka was thoroughly scared and swore: Auntie turned away to the window where the cross of the Turenevo Church, old and modest, glowed in the sunset through the green of the birch trees. Nastya and Raisa were walking together in the garden.

Nastya had wrapped the corner of her Angora shawl round Raisa's shoulders and was bending low over the girl, talking to her.

"Don't believe a single word he says, my dear.... He is a marvel at weaving wonder out of words: he pretends to be so unfortunate that you listen to him, you listen and bawl like a fool.... I know his character inside out, I see through him as though he were made of glass... he can't get on without talking, that's his nature. In fact that's what we came here for, to talk...."

"No, I tell you he is unhappy," said Raisa.

"He's unhappy?... Now, my dear, you're still only a child.... How is he unhappy when the women flock round him like they do." Nastya snorted. "When I got hold of him, an old woman was in love with him, you understand, and he took everything she had and drove her away, my dear, drove her out of the house...."

Raisa turned her face away and walked on for a while without speaking. Nastya kept stealing glances at her and then swiftly unbuttoned the sleeve of her blouse and turned it back to the elbow.

"Here's something for you to admire, just look how he treats me. . . . See this horrible scar, along my whole arm. . . ." Almost in tears she pressed her lips to the pink line on her arm, sucked it and angrily turned down her sleeve. "I will never forgive him for that scar, as long as I live. . . . When he gets mad he doesn't know whether he's handling a dog or a human being. . . . The prison cell has been crying for him for a long time. . . . One day I shall take him to court. . . ."

"Good Lord," Raisa cried out, "what are you telling me!"

"And what do you care? Are you sorry for him?"

"I don't know. . . . You're not telling me the truth. . . . I know you're just talking that way. . . ."

"So you've fallen in love with him, have you? . . . So that's it. You ought to have told me that at first. We'll start on a different sort of talk, then. . . ."

Nastya had already let go of Raisa's shoulder and she placed her hands on her hips and frowned; she was not destined to continue the conversation. Raisa sat down quickly on a bench, bent over with her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands, her shoulders trembling from her sobs. . . .

Nastya looked at her and wrinkled her nose: Raisa's shoulders were narrow and in general she looked like a little chicken. . . . Nastya lit a cigarette, drew at it deeply a few times and then hurled it into the grass; she sat down impetuously beside the girl and took her by the shoulders.

"Listen. . . . Don't you bawl because of that devil. . . . I shan't give him to you anyway, you know that yourself. . . . And if I did you'd only weep your eyes out on account of him. Stop it, then. . . ."

VIII

Nikolushka was sent to the woods to get an airing. When he had learnt that the peasants were going to burn Auntie up he screamed and raved and armed himself with a shotgun to the terror of all the girls in the kitchen; it had cost Auntie a great deal of trouble to persuade him to give up his idea of dealing with the peasants. She took the gun away from him and said:

"What you ought to do, my friend, is take a look at our property. Look at the woods: Afrikan Ilyich assures me that in fifty years that forest will be a gold mine."

The cart that was brought to the porch for Nikolushka rattled as though it were loaded with old iron. Auntie accompanied him to the gates.

"Go along, go along, young man, get a breath of fresh air. . . ."

The village gate was closed. Nikolushka shouted for a long while for someone to open it. At last a bowed ancient came out of a straw shelter, took off his hat and looked at the traveler.

"Hi, Granddad, open the gate!" shouted Nikolushka angrily.

"All right, I'm coming in a minute!" The old man unhurriedly removed a bast loop and opened a gate that squeaked on a dozen different notes. "Where are you from, sir? . . ."

Nikolushka did not answer but hit the horse with the reins and drove rapidly downhill; the old man gazed after him for a long time—his sight was bad and as for hearing, he hadn't heard anything for years. . . .

The woods of which Afrikan Ilyich has spoken had really once been a magnificent pine forest—but that was in old Turennev's time. In the autumn trees for masts were selected and bound round at the base with wire so they would swell with resin and become as hard as iron and amber coloured, and in January they were felled. Nikolushka, pulling the reins constantly from under the tail of his lazy nag that kept shaking its head

back and forth to keep off the horseflies, saw nothing but a sorry growth of young pine and a consumptive-looking hazel grove along a gully where peasant horses were nipping the trees; when they saw the cart they jumped farther away from the road on their hobbled feet.

"Hi, young fellow, where is the Turenev Woods here?" Nikolushka asked a herdsman's boy who sat on a tree stump.

"What?"

"The woods, I said, where are the woods, idiot?... Our woods?"

"That there's the woods," said the boy pushing his cap forward on to his nose.

Nikolushka shrugged his shoulders and drove on until the forest became denser; there he wound the reins round the cart rail, alighted with difficulty and walked over the soft crackling pine needles that carpeted the forest. All round him were stumps, trees with crooked trunks and young saplings; the wind moaned sadly overhead, clouds floated across the blue sky. Sadly Nikolushka crossed a gully overgrown with ferns and lay down on the high ground, his hands under the back of his head....

Alas, gone for ever were the good times—the sleepless nights, the lights on the broad avenues, the snow, the odour of perfumes and furs, the pleasure of fine linen and the slippery silk of evening frocks.... The glass doors of the restaurant thrown wide open by the usually scared-looking porter, the hall of the restaurant where the music strained all one's nerves and played on them drunkenly.... The lights of the chandeliers, the glittering diamonds, the warm beauty of women's shoulders.... The sweating bucket and the gold-necked bottle covered with a snow-white napkin.... The intoxicating hum of voices.... And in the smoky gloom of a mirror scratched all over by diamonds, red tunics, flying fiddle bows, flowers, and women's eyes dark as a soul stirred by music, black coffee and mad desire....

Nikolushka screwed up his eyes, shook his head and sat

up on the grass; all around him—tree stumps, anaemic firs and the pine needles rustling overhead. . . Dreary indeed was Turenev Woods. . . Oh, Lord, Oh Lord, what a place to while the time away!

3" Nikolushka turned over on to his stomach and began to chew a blade of grass. Solitude was rotten, especially in the forest on a hot afternoon. . . Memories of the past filled Nikolushka's head—he remembered moments that made the blood seethe in his veins. . . Only to take one of those moments and then, then plunge head down forever in the abyss—in the pupils of mad eyes, in the rustle of silk skirts, in the darkness of feminine fragrance. . . A cone fell from a tree into the grass right in front of Nikolushka's face. . . He bit through the blade of grass and laughed bitterly: "Auntie Anna Mikhailovna in her fustian blouse, with her mice and her religious questions. . . Afrikan Ilyich whose snores fill the house every day after lunch. . . Rooms piled up with wheat, books eaten away by mice. . . Nastyenka familiar down to the tiniest birthmark. . . Brrr. . . Commonplace. . . Then you have to try and pull yourself together, work. . . There's not a man could pull himself together under such circumstances. . . A morass. . ."

A dry branch cracked behind a nearby fir tree. Nikolushka turned quickly round and through the branches saw Raisa's pink frock. . . The edge of the gingham skirt seemed to sweep him out of his hopeless gloom. . . Nikolushka jumped up, straightened his jacket and went to Raisa—she had her back to him and was bending down fumbling in the moss. He called her name softly. She straightened up, looked round, gasped and dropped a mushroom from her hand.

"I've come to inspect our wilderness," said Nikolushka, "what are you doing here? . . ."

"I'm gathering mushrooms," answered Raisa, breathing heavily as though from fright, "see, I have got a lot of them, all white, pine mushrooms. . ."

"They're nice mushrooms.... So you like mushrooms?"

"Of course...."

"I'm a city man.... I don't know what to look for, I should pick toadstools...." -

Raisa blushed a deep red and smiled, throwing her head back slightly and showing her even teeth.... Nikolushka could scarcely take his eyes off her tender throat.

"Let us go together," he said, "I'll try and help you."

"Oh, no, Nikolai Mikhailovich, that's not a suitable occupation for you...."

"Why is it suitable for you if not for me?"

"You're a, er, city-dweller," said Raisa; she tossed a plait of hair from her chest to her back and walked on.

Nikolushka walked beside her, frowning, his lips pressed bitterly together....

"Now, Raisa, you have reminded me of the most painful thing," he said after a short silence. "But let us not speak about me.... It makes no difference, there's no other way for me," as he walked along he broke off a dry twig, snapped it in two and threw it away, "my life is over...."

Raisa bent down, picked a mushroom and thrust it into the basket under a cover of maple leaves.

"People have done me too much harm, have trampled on everything sacred in my soul.... Well, I'll have to live here, forgotten, of no use to anybody.... And I have not got long to live with my liver.... Never mind.... And yet sometimes it seems a pity, why am I not a peasant, healthy, carefree, with an axe in my hands—I fell a huge pine and make the chips fly...."

"Stop it, Nikolai Mikhailovich," whispered Raisa in a scarcely audible voice; he could see that her eyes were closed and her lashes wet.

"Raisa, Raya, my darling," he cried in a fervent voice that even astonished him, "you are sorry for me ... sweetheart...." He seized her little, cold, trembling hands. "Yes? Yes?... Oh, help me...."

"How can I help you, I am so foolish, Nikolai Mikhailovich."

"Love me."

These words burst from Nikolushka in an uncontrollable surge, of their own accord. Raisa was in such confusion that she dropped the basket of mushrooms, opened her little mouth and the tears in her blue eyes immediately dried up....

"Love me," repeated Nikolushka and, dropping to his knees, put his arms around Raisa and lifted his troubled face to her. "You can save me.... You will save me... The very first moment you came into the room—pure, innocent, all pink, I realized—I shall go out of my mind.... Either you or—death..."

Two hours later Nikolushka ran along the dark passage opening doors and shouting into the empty rooms.

"Aunt.... Aunt.... Anna Mikhailovna, where are you?"

"What's bitten you, young man," asked Auntie at last, poking her head out of the box room in the corner.

"I absolutely must talk with you!..."

"The Lord help us.... You don't look yourself at all!"

With a firm tread Nikolushka strode into the box room, a dark place that smelt of furs, mothballs and mice and without removing his hat sat down on a trunk; he turned eyes filled with hatred on Nastya who was standing by the window, beside the armchair where she had been talking to Auntie.

"Go away, Nastya," began Nikolushka and suddenly stamped his foot madly on the floor, "go away, I tell you...."

"Have you gone crazy, young man?" asked Nastyenka, following his glance attentively Nikolushka jumped up but sat down again. Anna Mikhailovna turned her head first to Nikolushka and then to Nastyenka in bewilderment.

"If that woman does not go away I shall not be responsible for my actions," he said, swallowing his saliva. Nastya pursed her lips, hid her hands under her kerchief and walked out.

"Anna Mikhailovna," said Nikolushka, clutching his head between his hands, "Auntie, do you want me to become a man? Do you want me to be young and healthy and earn my living honestly? As long as I have that woman near me I am a corpse.... She is drawing me down into the abyss.... She, she is the cause of my disgrace...."

"Wait a minute, Nikolai," his aunt interrupted him in a voice that quivered with fright, "speak reasonably... my head is in a whirl.... What has happened?"

"Auntie, I am going to marry Raisa...."

IX

Auntie's bedroom smelt of valerian drops. Anna Mikhailovna was sitting in an armchair nodding sleepily, a cold bandage round her head. Afrikan Ilyich stood beside her sighing and smoking. Occasionally Auntie sighed, too.

It was after lunch, the hour when the hens and dogs are dozing on the farms and estates, when the people are taking forty winks in the shadow of a fence, in a shed or a carriage house, when some small boy, his shirt tied in a knot at his back, is yawning peacefully on the ash heap holding a tousled sparrow in his dirty fist; somewhere in a cottage a young woman, heavy with child, was singing monotonously—before her was a bowl of warm kvass, flies crawling over the table, a sickly smell of onions in the cottage, and through the fly-speckled windows a view of the same barn and yellow commonland. The young woman was heavy at heart and she softly dragged out the words of her song; under the window a pig lay listening to her and driving away the tormenting flies with his ragged ear. And that was Vasilisa the cook singing on the back porch. Afrikan Ilyich listened in silence until at last he said with a loud sigh:

"How that woman howls, curse her...."

Auntie nodded without opening her eyes.

Yesterday's scene had been hard on her: Nastya had been listening at the door when Nikolushka made his announcement and had burst into the box room like a wild beast. Nikolushka had lost his presence of mind at the sight of those flashing eyes and had turned to Auntie and exclaimed with a sob: "There, you see!"

Then Nastya had struck him in the face with her fist and had got her hands into his hair. Nikolushka spat on her and waved his arms while Auntie self-sacrificingly got in between the fighting couple and came in for her share: Afrikan Ilyich had come running in; dragged Nastya off Nikolushka and carried her away, she shouting the while: "I'll part your strumpet's hair for her." Nikolushka, first crying on Auntie's shoulder and then on Afrikan Ilyich's waistcoat, again told the whole story of his ruined life. He was given vodka to bring him to his senses. Until long after midnight the old house resounded to sobbing, occasional savage screams and Auntie's monotonous scolding voice. That same evening Mashutka, despite her fear of ghosts, ran to look in at the priest's window and afterwards told the girls in the kitchen how Ivan, without his surplice and wearing only his underpants, had walked up and down the room like a heron, muttering something all the time, while Raisa had been bitterly crying with her head pressed into the pillow.

Early next morning Auntie went to Father Ivan but he was already putting Raisa into an old tarantass; he coldly lectured Anna Mikhailovna on the immorality of her nephew, urged on his gelding and drove away with the broken brim of his hat flapping up and down.

Auntie was on her way home and was looking back at the departing tarantass when she noticed Nikolushka come out from under the dam and stand before them waving his cap. Father Ivan stood up and whipped his horse. Raisa would have leaned out of the carriage but held fast by the priest's

hand she covered her face with a handkerchief. All this excitement gave Auntie migraine.

Pushing the cold compress back from her eyes Anna Mikhailovna began to speak in a weak voice:

"It is a sin to expect a reward from people, my friend, but still it hurts me—he is very ungrateful...."

"Hmm, that nephew of yours certainly likes taking the cream off the milk...."

"Just think of it, he blames me for everything.... And Nastya is angry with me as though I brought him and Raisa together."

"Give 'em both a sound thrashing—that's my opinion...."

"Oh, no, anything but that, Afrikan Ilyich."

"And if they mustn't be thrashed what then?"

"I can't imagine.... As soon as the priest comes back go to him, my friend, and tell him I want to confess and if he allows it I will take Holy Communion on Sunday."

Afrikan Ilyich groaned; he was an atheist but out of respect for Auntie he did not air his convictions. Anna Mikhailovna began to nod again. On the back porch Vasilisa was still singing one and the same song. It would have been better if there had been no such song in Christian Russia.

X

Two days passed. The Turenev house was calm but silent. They did not sit long at table but left immediately after meals for their respective rooms. In her kindly simplicity Anna Mikhailovna thought that Nikolushka's burst of passion had passed; Nikolushka in fact walked about unshaven, gloomy and dejected and it was only from Nastyenka's penetrating glances and her crooked smile that one could guess that all was not well with Nikolushka....

Then this happened. Towards evening Nikolushka pulled

a soft cap down to his ears, lit a cigarette and left the house. "Where are you going?" Auntie asked him. He shrugged his shoulders and answered, "Nowhere," and walked off across the dam to the mill. Afrikan Ilyich at that time was dozing in the box room and there was nobody to tell Auntie what that "Nowhere" meant; she did not even recall that half an hour before she herself had sent Mashutka to the mill for crayfish that the miller's brother and the verger Konstantin Palych were catching with a dragnet in the millpond.

In the gully at the end of the dam stood the mill with its double-sloped, moss-covered roof. In the field behind the mill, carts from which the horses had been unharnessed stood under the shade of huge crooked black poplars. Still farther on the verger, his red hair fluttering in the wind and up to his knees in water, and the miller's brother, up to his chest in water, were moving slowly along under the low bank: they were pulling the dragnet and shouting: "How much deeper?" "Get in, I tell you!" "How much deeper, then?" "Get in, I tell you, antichrist..."

Nikolushka walked slowly as far as the mill, went down to the spillway where a thin stream of water flowed over mildewed boards as slippery as silk; where the water wheel, black, wet and covered with the long green strands of water-weeds, groaned as it turned heavily and unwillingly; where in the greenish murk that smelt of damp and tar the wooden gears creaked and rattled as they turned, shaking the ramshackle old mill to its very foundations; where village boys catching frogs with a cloth had looked through the cracks between the boards of the staging and had often seen the water demon sitting on the bottom of the millpond with his webbed hands clasping the green piles....

Nikolushka had nowhere in particular to go. He threw his cigarette end into the foam under the mill wheel, climbed up the shaky ladder to where the dust from the flour swam in the sun's rays, where the heavy millstones flew lightly round

and round and strong-smelling rye flour trickled into the hoppers; he picked up a pinch of the flour, rubbed it between his fingers and went out again beyond the gates.

Peasants who had arrived before dawn with cartloads of grain to grind sat out here in the field, some on the grass, others on a broken millstone. Putting on a stern look, Nikolushka greeted them in a deep voice: "Good-day, boys." Some of the peasants doffed their caps; Prov the miller, an old soldier said invitingly, "Sit down, young master. . . ." and moved up, offering Nikolushka a place on the millstone. . . .

"That's how it was," Prov continued his story, pressing down the ashes in his pipe with a black finger, "there's no telling how many of our people he finished off. . . . General Baryatinsky would send out troops and Shamil finished them all off for him. . . . How many of our bones were left lying in that Caucasus, something terrible, boys. . . . Shamil was stubborn but General Baryatinsky was still more stubborn: you can't allow the Russian Emperor to retreat before Shamil, he said."

"Of course it made him sore," said one of the peasants, bending down and fiddling with the toe of his bast shoe.

"Well, yes, kind of sore. So General Baryatinsky gathered a big army and surrounded Shamil on all sides—he left him no food and no water; Shamil climbed right up to the top of a mountain with his Circassians and fired down from there, wouldn't surrender. . . . Our boys brought ladders and climbed and climbed, and, you know, as the first were killed others climbed in their places. . . . General Baryatinsky stood down below stroking his beard into two like this and shouting: 'I will not permit Russian arms to be disgraced. . . .'"

"Some people are cocky that way," said the same peasant.

"At last the Circassians had no more shells left. That's when our troops got them. They reached the top of the hill and saw the Circassians standing round in a ring and Shamil sitting on a stone in the middle reading the Koran, 'Surrender!' the Russians shouted. And what happened, brother? Just imagine.

those Circassians, they got on their horses, wrapped their goat-skin cloaks round them and jumped into the sea. . . . From that mountain they flew eighteen versts into the sea. . . . Just then our soldiers came up and grabbed Shamil and tied his hands. . . .”

“Still, the general had his own way,” said the same peasant again.

Nikolushka sat on the millstone smoking and blinking frequently. The fact of the matter was that he had long ago noticed Mashutka beside the nearby carts. She was standing with her knee raised and her heel resting on the spoke of a wheel, looking merrily towards Nikolushka. She was wearing a straight black blouse with yellow trimmings, the prevailing fashion of Turenevo village, a yellow kerchief and a red skirt.

“All right,” said Nikolushka, frowning as though something were toward, “good-bye, boys!” He rose lazily and walked towards the carts, striding with his feet wide apart like a cavalryman.

Mashutka looked at him with her laughing eyes. He pretended that he had only just noticed her, and stopped in his tracks swaying back and forth.

“Oh, you’re here? What are you doing?”

Mashutka raised eyebrows that seemed to have been finely drawn with charcoal, took her bare foot from the wheel and smiled.

“Auntie sent me for crayfish, and all those devils do is shout, they haven’t caught a single one yet!”

She tossed her head and laughed out loud jerking her elbow in the direction of the millpond.

“The verger doesn’t want to go into the water, says he’s a man of the church.”

Nikolushka turned towards the wide pond that had taken on a bluish hue in the twilight. On the low bank that had been stamped under the hoofs of the cattle the verger and the miller’s brother, a little, short peasant, were still bickering, drag-

ging the net from each other. There was naturally nothing particular to laugh at in that foolish scene. Nikolushka wrinkled up his nose in disgust.

"And you just sit here," he said, pausing between his words. "Look out, or Auntie will be after you. Who are you waiting for?"

Mashutka's smiling face suddenly became serious and she pressed her lips together. She looked at Nikolushka attentively, almost sternly, with eyes shaded by her long lashes, pulled her kerchief forward on to her forehead, walked away, stepping carefully with her bare feet and then glanced back once more swiftly at Nikolushka.

"Oh, hell," he muttered, drawing into his nostrils air that had for some reason become particularly aromatic, "oh, hell!"

The well-known pain of longing filled his breast. . . . It was becoming obvious—some force had got him out of bed earlier than usual that morning, had driven him from room to room, into the passage, the kitchen and the garden and had finally brought him to the mill.

His feet grew light, his eyes became clearer, all the strength that was in him, all the sweet joy and the fire, was racing after the girl walking away along the bank of the pond, the wind blowing out her red skirt and yellow kerchief. . . . When he had seen her standing by the wheel, that raised knee had turned Nikolushka's head—now the grass, yellowish-green in the light of the setting sun was beating against her knees.

"To hell with Nastya and Auntie," he thought with divine nonchalance and followed the girl, his feet simply moving of their own accord across the meadow. She turned round, her little face with its black brows trembled in fear, she walked faster, he ran. Panting, he caught up with her beside a stack of last year's straw near the threshing barns and seized her by the hand.

"Where are you running to?"

"Let me go, Nikolai Mikhailovich," she said in a quick whisper and twisted her arm, but her strength left her.

"Listen, Masha, I want to talk to you about. . . ."

"Master, kind master, don't say it. . . ."

"It's like this. . . . I can't go on this way any longer. . . . They have ruined my life. . . . I didn't sleep all last night. . . . I'll marry you, honestly, I will. . . ."

"Master, dear master, they'll see us. . . ."

"They won't see anything. . . . Look how dark it's getting. . . . Sit down here, in the straw. . . . How pretty you are. . . . You didn't scratch your legs when you walked through the grass, did you? . . . What a lovely mouth. . . . What are you staring at me like that for, Masha, Mashenka. . . ."

Mashutka looked at Nikolushka's frightening, handsome, smiling face with unseeing eyes crossed from excitement; she seemed to hear him muttering something in the distance. She bit her lower lip to keep her chin from trembling. As she looked she moved farther away from him trying to ward him off.

When Nikolushka ran along the bank of the pond after Mashutka the peasants sitting by the mill were watching him.

"Ai, the young master's sticking his nose into our plate of soup," began one.

"And he's married too!"

"And what if he is. . . . They're worse when they're married; they're used to the sweets."

"He'll ruin the girl."

"Whose is she?"

"Vasilisa's orphan."

"A fine girl. . . ."

"D'you see how he flew after her?"

"He eats well, sleeps well, why shouldn't he be able to chase 'em?"

"Last year there was some sort of an artist came here and they broke his legs for him."

"It wouldn't hurt to break his. . . ."

"He's going towards the threshing barns. . . . Got his head screwed on all right. . . . He'll get her in the straw there and that'll be the end of it."

"There's no good in that business. . . ."

"Of course there's no good in it. . . ."

Two young Turenevo lads lying on the grass nearby stood up, glanced at each other, and ran across the dam to the village. The peasants followed them with their eyes and said:

"They'll give him a beating. . . ."

"And what if they do, nothing wrong in that. . . ."

"The young master will pay dear for his sweets. . . ."

XI

At dusk Nastya sat by the dusty window of her bedroom. Her thin, cold hand held a fluffy brown shawl together at her throat—the shawl was a gift from Auntie who loved everything brown, of good quality and modest. Nastya was sleepy and yet did not want to go to sleep, she felt as dull as the dusty window with the dim outlines of the bushes, the tumbledown buildings with their collapsing thatched roofs and the barely visible washing on the line, a dirty white in the twilight.

Auntie came in, her presence made known by the glow of her cigarette and sat down on a trunk near the wall.

"Don't you light the lamps?" she said softly.

"No . . . somehow I don't feel like it. . . ."

"Now, now!" She could hear Auntie stifling a yawn. "You are alone, Nastya?"

"Yes, alone. . . ."

"I'd noticed that Nikolushka was away a long time. He went away but I thought he had returned."

"He'll come."

Outside the window a grey cat stood up on its hind legs, stared through the window into the room, took away first one

paw and then the other and disappeared. Nastya stirred in her chair.

"I don't like cats looking in at the window. . . . I had a friend once, a real coquette, she was so afraid of cats, she fainted. . . ."

"And Mashutka has disappeared somewhere too," said Auntie quickly.

"I used to live well once," Nastya began after a short pause, "I had my own apartment, furniture upholstered in blue satin, two fur coats—one sable and the other mink with ermine on top. And the diamonds I had! And that scoundrel squandered it all on drink. . . ."

"Oh, Nastyenka. . . ."

"Of course he's a scoundrel, the worst there is. . . ."

"Oh, Nastyenka. . . ."

"What, Anna Mikhailovna?"

"I think you should forgive him, Nastyenka. . . ."

"As though I had never forgiven him. . . . Oh, why did I come here? You should have seen the admirers I had. There was one baron who crawled round me on his knees, offered me a house on Sergiev Street, he brought me the title deed, and I threw him and his title deed out of the door because I couldn't stand him. . . . Forgive him. . . . I still have wounds on my body from his blows, but I forgave him. . . . And when he took my last necklace to the pawnshop I knew that I should never see a kopek of the money he got. . . . He pawned the necklace and drank the money with my friend Sonka Yevrion, the coquette. . . . I scratched the skin off his ugly mug—and I forgave him. . . . I would have followed him to hard labour if he had loved me alone and no other. . . ."

Nastyenka stopped, sniffed and began to fumble for a handkerchief in the armchair in which she was sitting.

"You had better talk to him about the forgiveness, Anna Mikhailovna. . . . All he thinks of now is how to get his revenge on me, because I got him away from that bit of a girl, that

Raisa. . . I know who he's got on his brain now: he's making up to your Mashutka. . . ."

"God alone knows what you are saying!" exclaimed Auntie and got up from the trunk. "Excuse me, Nastyenko, but you have a very wicked imagination. . . . I have been watching you for some time . . . it is hard, hard, with you. . . ."

Nastya sobbed and threw herself into the depths of the big armchair. Strangely enough, her face seemed to grow brighter, rosier. Her fine profile stood out more clearly against the brown of the old upholstery, a fantastic light turned her hair to gold until her whole head with its closed eyes was lit up. . . .

"What's that?" exclaimed Auntie. "What a light!"

Nastya opened her eyes and gasped: the window was like a crimson rectangle in the plastered wall.

"Fire!" she screamed, jumping out of the chair.

Silently Auntie raised her hands to her head. Doors were already slamming in the house, there was a trampling of feet and frightened voices calling for Auntie. The door opened with a crash, a draught blew across the room, and Afrikan Ilyich came in.

"Fire!" he said in a thick voice, "they have set fire to the threshing barns!"

He stood at the window and watched the red glow, his hands folded behind his back, round-shouldered and red-faced. Nastya lay down on the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

Auntie shouted down the passage.

"Nikolushka! Where is Nikolushka? Girls, girls, run and look for the young master."

The glow grew brighter. The log walls of the outhouses in the yard were all lit up. Thick dancing shadows sprang from the bushes, the curious idlers standing at the gates made black silhouettes. . . . They heard frightened voices calling.

"He's coming. . . . He's coming. . . ."

One of the girls ran into the house and whispered loudly down the passage.

"Mistress, he's come!"

Auntie hurried to meet him and suddenly exclaimed in a horrified voice:

"Oh, my Lord!..."

Afrikan Ilyich turned away from the window. Nastya lifted her head from the pillow. Nikolushka came in, hatless, disheveled, his shirt showing white under his arm where his coat was torn. His mouth was black and battered, one eye and his cheek were swollen.... With his elbow he pushed aside Auntie who had come mincing up to him and collapsed on to a chair.

"Send them all to court! Shoot them!" he screamed out and bending over began spitting blood on the floor.

Auntie was already beside him with a towel and a jug of water, Nastya sat bolt upright on the bed, her neck stretched out, and stared penetratingly at Nikolushka with horror-stricken eyes.

"Calm down, calm down, my friend," muttered Auntie, laying the wet towel on Nikolushka's face, "to think that such a thing should happen.... Who did this to you?"

"I gave one of them what he was asking for, straight in the teeth!"

"All right, all right, calm down, young man!"

Afrikan Ilyich, his feet apart, his hands in his pockets, was looking Nikolushka up and down.

"Tell us where they did this to you then," he said. "You must have been in the threshing barn. You have straw in your hair..."

Leaning over to him he asked softly but sternly:

"Did you see Masha?"

"She ran away," answered Nikolushka, "she escaped..."

Afrikan Ilyich glanced swiftly at Auntie whose cheeks and chin shook angrily. Nastya, smiling strangely, slid down from the bed and squatting in front of Nikolushka spoke to him in wheedling tones, almost gaily.

"Tell us, Koka, tell us how things were with you and her."

The barns were still burning when Afrikan Ilyich went out

into the garden. A thin smoke spread over the damp grass, the trunks of the birches glowed red, here and there a wet leaf was glistening, dark red shadows hovered across the meadow and the dry crown of the poplar stood out clearly against the sky.

The old house gazing out into the smoky meadows with its blood-red windows looked as if it had been lifted partly out of a mass of dark thickets; it had come to life, was gloomily majestic and solemn with its six peeling plastered columns, and its tumbledown fronton over which the whirling doves were rose-coloured in the glow.

On the second floor Afrikan Ilyich saw a pale white face pressed for a minute against one of the windows and then stagger back. Afrikan Ilyich hurried out on to the balcony, pulled the door which stood half open, and went into the drawing room; the black silhouettes of leaves and branches lay on the bare plaster walls like Chinese paintings; he listened and walked on from room to room up to his knees in wheat.

In the library, where the old books were still lying around the stepladder, where the glass doors and their brass corners glistened, he saw Mashutka in a corner behind a black bookcase—her head was bare, she stood with her head drawn into her shoulders like a cornered rat. Afrikan Ilyich took her by the hand. She screamed weakly and broke away. He seized her more tightly and took her downstairs to Auntie.

XII

When Anna Mikhailovna saw Mashutka in her bedroom, disheveled, with head hanging down, her face began to twitch, she rolled her eyes, sat down on the floor and began to moan—a heart attack had begun. Next morning there came another attack and they sent for the village doctor. The whole house quietened down. Afrikan Ilyich walked about in his socks, black as a thundercloud. Mashutka, badly beaten by Vasilisa, was hiding in one of the many big, dusty storerooms of the Turenev

house. Nikolushka lay in bed with his head covered and took neither food nor drink. Nastya wandered about not knowing what to do, she looked haggard, her nose had become more pointed and it seemed as though she were burning up inside, as though she were being consumed with an inner fire.

On the third day Auntie felt better, Father Ivan came to see her and she spent some hours in conversation with him although nobody knew what they were talking about. In the evening Afrikan Ilyich went into Nikolushka's room, stood there a minute in silence while he rolled himself a cigarette and slowly lit it.

"Take the trouble to get up immediately, dress yourself and go to Anna Mikhailovna in her bedroom," he said.

Nikolushka groaned softly under the blanket but still he got up, dressed himself, and scarcely able to drag his legs, supporting himself by the walls, made his way to Auntie and when she indicated her permission for him to sit down he lowered himself on to a chair near the door, dropped his head and like one in torment, closed his eyes surrounded with purple bruises. Afrikan Ilyich sat on Auntie's bed and smoked, screwing up his eyes at the smoke. Auntie sat in her armchair, round-shouldered, wrinkled, scarcely alive....

"Firstly," she said, her voice scarcely audible from weakness but quite firm, "be kind enough to tell me all.... Firstly, you have to admit everything candidly...."

Nikolushka began to rock to and fro on his chair and for a long time could not say a word, he just bellowed like a cow, then, having found the right line, he began to tell them how his whole life had been nothing but struggle and tragedy; he dreamed of self-perfection, of stern and honest labour, but all manner of contingencies had arisen and had again and again pushed him into the abyss. His blood grew cold, his soul slumbered in despair, and he strove hungrily towards a bright, pure light, which would fire his blood, awaken him to activity.... Every time, however, that tiny light had turned out to be a temptation of the devil... The day before yesterday, for

example, he had gone to the carts in order to send Mashutka home so that she should not wander idly about. . . . And that girl, instead of obeying him, had looked at him so artfully, had begun to lift her knee up on to the wheel, and instantly the abyss had opened up before him. . . .

"Auntie," he exclaimed, beating his breast and falling on his knees, "surely you must understand the depths of degradation the people have led me to! . . . Hold out your hand to me, lift me out of the abyss. . . ."

Anna Mikhailovna listened, her nose down, her eyes closed, and from under her wrinkled eyelids, there trickled occasional and evidently bitter tears. . . .

Afrikan Ilyich coughed several times to encourage Auntie. Mastering her excitement and sorrow she said to Nikolushka:

"Go back to your room!"

He bowed, and as he was in a mood of conversation knocked at Nastya's door and talked with her till dawn. The floor boards creaked under his feet the whole night long and his dull, velvety voice could be heard throughout the silent Turennev house. Upstairs, where the wheat lay, the mice squeaked and ran about all night. All night the window in Anna Mikhailovna's room shone through the bushes: kneeling before the miraculous Redeemer she prayed that the Lord bring light into the desolate gloom of that ancient, sinful house.

Next morning Nikolushka came down to breakfast refreshed—all the black spots on his soul had been cleansed and washed away during the night. Nastya came down, sad, tired and silent. Afrikan Ilyich looked at them and groaned, turned his back on them and continued drinking tea from his saucer. Nikolushka asked him for some tobacco and he pushed the tobacco box across to him with his elbow. Nastya, who was pouring out tea, laughed.

"Smoking is an expensive and unhealthy habit," said Nikolushka, "I'm thinking of giving it up."

At that moment Auntie came into the dining room in a black

hat, shapeless from its long stay in a trunk, fastened with ribbons under her chin; it sat on her head like a bonnet. Looking into the corner she said:

"Nikolai, get ready, we're leaving...."

The saucer trembled in Nikolushka's hand and he spilt his tea.

"Where to, Auntie?"

"To the monastery," answered Auntie firmly and taking Afrikan Ilyich by the sleeve she led him aside to talk to him in secret.

Nastya sat silent, her grey eyes wide open. Nikolushka traced patterns on the wet oilcloth with his finger....

"Take only the most essential things with you, we'll talk on the way," said Auntie and sat down to the table to drink a cup of tea before leaving.

An hour later Auntie and Nikolushka were seated in the tarantass, on cushions embroidered in cross-stitch. Nikolushka, his cap askew, was smiling pitifully; he waved his hand to Nastya for the last time.

"Good-bye, sweetheart!"

Nastya stood on the porch, her mouth half covered with the fluffy shawl, either crying or laughing.

"God be with you!" exclaimed Auntie.

The horses moved off. A hound ran out from under the tarantass. A frightened chicken ran clucking from the road. They were off.

Nastyenka came out and sat on the steps of the porch, leaning her arms on her knees, her hands supporting her chin. In the deep blue sky over the Turenv Manor House, over the road where the tarantass came into sight again on the turn, over the dwindling family woods—white clouds floated indifferently.

Afrikan Ilyich, leaning against the post of the porch, smoked and sighed deeply. Suddenly one of his eyes—it hung low like that of a dog—winked.

"Ai, ai, they've packed that cockalorum off!"



MISHUKA NALYMOV

A TALE OF THE TRANS-VOLGA

I

THE MANOR houses of the gentry of Stavropol Uyezd have for centuries occupied the low-lying land beyond the Volga; they stand in the shade of grey gardens laid out around ponds and swimming pools; in extensive farmyards overgrown with grass stood thatched barns and other farm buildings.

The traveler seated in a tarantass on cushions embroidered in all four corners with cockerels, his equipage drawn by two sorry, fly-tormented post nags, had no reason for raising his weary eyelids; heat, dust, a dusty road that wound its way imperceptibly across the steppes, larks high up in the heavens over the cornfields and, far away in the distance, thatched roofs and long poles over the wells.... Sometimes the crowns of willows rose above low hills and occasionally a tarantass would roll past a low pond whose banks were pitted with the hoof-marks of cattle, past a ditch thickly overgrown with acacia, past the house of the Nalymov family, the pillars of which gleamed white through the green of the poplars.

In this case, a traveler who knew the local customs would turn his horses directly off the road so as to avoid the manor house and grounds, especially if Mishuka—Mikhal Mikhalych Nalymov—were sitting at the window in his dressing gown; Mishuka had long, drooping moustaches, there were three folds of flesh that lay in waves on the nape of his

bull neck and he would sit and frown grimly at any passing tarantass.

God alone knows what to expect from Mishuka: he might order his servants to run after a traveler and invite him into the house, would unharness the horses and send them out grazing with his own herds and roll the tarantass into the pond so that the wood should not dry out and crack. Or else, if the passing traveler did not take his fancy, he would rage and fume, lean out of the window, and scream: "Let loose the dogs—this is my land, how dare you drive past the house, you accursed devils! . . ." And the Nalymov dogs-- it were better not to see them even in a dream. In winter he had another trick--he would order the traveler to be stopped and given a besom to sweep away the traces left by his sleigh. Like it or not, he would have to get out of the sleigh and sweep while the dogs sat nearby with the hoarfrost gleaming white on their whiskers.

Anybody who knew the customs of the place, then, would make a wide detour in the steppes in order to avoid the Nalymov house. Guests came there rarely, but this was for a different reason.

One afternoon Mishuka was sitting at his open window as usual. The carriage house at the far end of the grass-grown yard stood with its doors wide open and grooms were going in and out. Suddenly they stepped aside to make way for a light open carriage to which three bays were harnessed; it came flying out of the carriage house as though released from a spring, described a semicircle and pulled up at the porch so suddenly that the trace horses sat back on their rumps while the shaft horse tossed its head and dug its hoofs deep into the soft ground. The coachman, dressed in a black waistcoat and a crimson shirt, took off a glove whitened with chalk, closed one of his nostrils by pressing his thumb against it and blew his nose on to the ground. A groom who had run all the way from the carriage house took the shaft horse by the bridle.

Mishuka leaned out of the window and examined the horses—a magnificent team, splendid beasts. Pleased with the sight, he got up from his chair, went into the next room and shouted: "Vanyushka!" A heavy-jowled boy came into the room. Mishuka sat down on the wooden bed and held out first one fat leg and then the other to the boy who pulled wide pantaloons on to them; Mishuka changed his dressing gown for a linen jacket, took up a short stock whip and a white peaked cap with red piping, threw out his broad chest and treading heavily on the bare boards went out on to the porch.

The shaft horse turned and gave a short neigh of pleasure when it saw Mishuka. Pyotr Ilyich, the estate steward, dressed in a long-tailed green coat, came up to his master and reported to him respectfully.

"Your Excellency," he said, "Miss Maria and Miss Dunya and Miss Telipatra ordered horses this morning but I did not let them have any."

Mishuka walked down the porch steps with his legs wide apart and stood looking up at the attic windows where the curtains were still drawn. He stood looking at the windows for a long time, shook his whip at them and stroked his moustaches.

"No horses are to be given to anybody without my permission, the accursed devils," he said and walked towards the carriage.

"Yes, sir. . . . And then the gardener came to the office complaining that Miss Fimka and Miss Bronka were picking raspberries, they stripped the canes. . . ."

"Oh, hell," exclaimed Mishuka, turning red, "I'll give it to them. . . ."

He pondered a moment, climbed into the carriage which tipped towards him under his weight, dropped heavily on to the spring cushions and pushed his peaked cap down over his eyes. The coachman took up the reins and turned his head.

"To Repievka," said Mishuka but as the carriage moved off he shouted: "Stop!"

"Hi, Pyotr Ilyich, call them all down here. Hurry!"

The steward ran into the house. Soon the girls, arranging their shawls and dressing gowns as they came out, appeared on the porch—Cleopatra tall and thin, scared Maria, sloppy and untidy, her bare feet thrust into her shoes, pretty Dunya leaning against a pillar behind them and gazing indifferently at the sky, and Fimka and Bronka, the village wenches, who were huddled together in the doorway staring at Mishuka with their noses wrinkled. . . .

"You," said Mishuka, blowing out his ginger moustaches, "look out for yourselves. I'm going away for three days and if any of you. . . ."—he slapped his whip against the leg of his boot—"see to it that not one of you . . . anything. . . ."

"Yes, that's all we need," said Cleopatra, twisting her mouth.

Pretty Dunya shrugged her shoulders lazily and looked up at the sky.

"Bring us some sweets," she said.

Mishuka frowned, wheezed, wanted to say something else but changed his mind and shouted to the coachman: "Get on!" and away they went.

As Mishuka drove along the road gazing at the rye and wheat fields that stretched away on either side as far as the horizon he wiped his florid face from time to time with a handkerchief; he was not thinking about anything in particular.

One of the minor landed gentry passed him in a droshky. Mishuka placed two fingers to his cap and looked sternly, his light eyes bulging out of his head, at the passing gentleman who greeted him deferentially.

They crossed a gully where they almost broke their springs in a pothole, they were all splashed with mud and by the time they reached the top the trace horses were in a lather; from there the road ran between mown meadows and a breeze sprang up.

"Repiev's," said the coachman, pointing with his whip to where a long droshky drawn by a pair was rolling along a country lane. A red sunshade bobbed over the white shirts of the people in the carriage. When Mishuka's three-horse equipage drew abreast the droshky its occupants shouted to him.

"Uncle Misha, come over to our place, come and see us!"

Between the two young Repiev brothers, Nikita and Sergei, sat a tall, young girl with fair hair. She held a red parasol in her hand, her straw hat was pushed back on to her neck where it hung by a ribbon, her light laughing eyes met Mishuka's goggle-eyed stare. He removed his cap and bowed. The carriage had moved on far ahead but Mishuka was still thinking—"Who is she? Who can it be?" In his slowly working mind he went over all the Repiev relations.

"It can't be anybody else but Vera Khodauskaya, that's who it is!"

He was still turning it over in his mind, gazing from one side to the other when the huge Repiev garden appeared from behind a hill and in the distance the rippling Volga glistened like fish scales in the sunlight.

II

The elder Repievs, brother and sister, were sitting on a balcony shaded by lilacs; they sat facing the garden and the ponds.

Olga Leontievna, in a lace boudoir cap and wearing round spectacles, lips pressed together, was embroidering a runner for the tea table; Pyotr Leontievich, her brother, who as usual was wearing just a black waistcoat, sat in silence, screwing up one eye and looking slyly at his sister with the other, all the time tapping on the floor with a boot whose walrus-hide top he loved pulling up. At such times he would say: "Look, I've been wearing them for twenty years and they're still as good

as new." He wore a velvet skullcap, the breeze played in his grey beard and the sleeves of his white shirt.

"I don't know how it's all going to end," said Olga Leontievna.

"How what'll end, Olenka?"

Olga Leontievna looked at him over the top of her glasses.

"You know very well what I'm worrying about."

"About Vera? Yes, yes, I'm thinking about Vera, too." Pyotr Leontievich, leaning on the arms of his chair, half rose and seated himself more comfortably. "Yes, it's quite a problem."

"Stop tapping your foot," Olga Leontievna said to him.

Her brother tapped a couple of times more and then screwed up both eyes.

"I think Seryozha ought to go away for a while," he said, pulling at the leg of his boot.

"Oh, Pyotr, I've known that for a long time without your help.... But it's a much more difficult business than that, you mark my words...."

"Not really?!"

"No, not that, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Pyotr.... But still, it's much, much more complicated than it seems...."

Brother and sister sat in silence. The birds were singing in the garden. The leaves were rustling.... It was warm and quiet for the old people, sitting there on the balcony. The sound of a bell came from the distance.

"Whose bell could that be?" asked Pyotr Leontievich.

Olga Leontievna took off her glasses and listened.

"That's Nalymov's bell. Surely it can't be Mishuka? What wind has blown him here?"

Mishuka, entering the balcony from the garden, bent over Olga Leontievna's hand, kissed Pyotr Leontievich, thinking the while, "The old man still kisses even if his estate is ruined—the damned old liberal."

Mishuka took off his cap and sat down, wiping his face and bald head with a handkerchief. Pyotr Leontievich, smiling, tapped him on the knee. Olga Leontievna continued her embroidery and spoke to him in a tone that was not exactly approving.

"It's a long time since you were here, Mishenka."

"I've been busy with the elections to the Zemstvo."

"Oh, I see," with a sidelong glance at her brother, "you sent the *mujiks* packing again."

"Yes, we blackballed them." Mishuka turned with a frown towards the garden. "This is no time to elect them, treasonable times, these are..."

"I've been wanting to give you a piece of my mind for a long time," began Olga Leontievna after a pause; "it is unworthy of a gentleman to play the pranks you do, Mishenka."

"What pranks?"

"Like that one not long ago when you called some shopkeeper to a hotel in Simbirsk, made him drunk, won all his money at cards and then threw him out of the room—what's more, he went head first through the door and the door was smashed."

"Oh, that's when I treated what's his name, Vaska Sevryugin..."

"Good heavens, what difference does it make if it was Vaska Sevryugin ... and they couldn't bring him round for three days ... Foul, Mishenka, unworthy..."

"Sevryugin was going to the toilet in the early morning," said Mishuka, "when he saw a lackey in the corridor without his coat on—he was cleaning windows ... 'What,' he says to the lackey, 'you dare appear before me without a coat,' and he began to beat him up. Years ago that lackey, Yevdokim, worked for my father as an errand boy, he remembers us all, he's a man to respect. Sevryugin came back from the toilet to my room and told me how he had beaten up Yevdokim ... 'You understand,' he says, 'I'm a cloth manufacturer.' And I said to

him: 'You're a swine, I'll turn you into calico....' He took offence, I pushed him and he went through the door. That's all."

Mishuka spent a long time wiping himself with his handkerchief after such a long speech while Olga Leontievna, laying down her embroidery, could not refrain from laughing; her face became a mass of wrinkles and she shook all over as old people do.

Vera ran out of the garden on to the balcony, behind her came Sergei taking the stairs three at a time and last of all came Nikita, smiling bashfully and kindheartedly. Vera held out both her hands to Mishuka and looked at him merrily with her grey flashing eyes.

"Let me introduce myself, Uncle Misha. Do you remember how you used to push me on the swing?"

"Why yes, I think I remember." Mishuka got up with great difficulty. "Of course, you're Verochka.... Yes, yes, I remember the swing, I remember it quite well now...."

He bent his head to one side. His bear's eyes became quite round. Vera looked into them and suddenly blushed. Her face looked sweet and confused. That lasted only a moment, however, and she lifted her dress slightly and curtsied importantly.

"You may congratulate me," she said, "I am nineteen tomorrow...."

Pyotr Leontievich, glancing at Vera with a smile of pleasure, nudged his sister with his elbow and chuckled. Nikita held up his hand to his ear.

"What? What did she say?" he asked.

"I said that tomorrow I shall be an old maid. It is an occasion on which we shall have guests, we shall go boating...."

"Yes, of course, we shall go boating," repeated Nikita and nodded his head.

Vera sat on the balustrade, put her arm round a white pillar and leaned her temple against it. Sergei, dark, with an aquiline nose and bright but malicious eyes, stood beside Vera with one hand thrust into his leather belt. Nikita made several attempts at taking a step towards her, then retreated and finally dropped his pince-nez. Mishuka, looking at the young people, began roaring with laughter.

"You know what?" said Olga Leontievna, rising from her chair, "let's go and have tea."

Nikita dallied on the balcony. He stood beside the pillar wiping his pince-nez and still smiling in his confusion; then his face became sad—in general he was a little out of place—in his pongee jacket, check trousers, a carefully washed look about him, absent-minded and awkward.

Vera turned round to look at him as she reached the door, then came back and stood beside him.

"Nikita, I am very sad, do you know why?"

"What did you say?"

"I said I am sad," she took hold of the top button on his waistcoat and he blushed, smiling pitifully.

"No, Verochka, I don't know why."

"Why are you blushing?"

"I'm not blushing, it's only your fancy."

Vera raised her clear eyes and looked at the clouds, her face was clear cut and refined and on her throat there was a little dimple that throbbed as she breathed.

"All right, it was just a fancy," she sang rather than said.

"Verochka, do you like Sergei very much?" asked Nikita, a whole minute later.

"Of course I do and I like you too."

Nikita pressed her hand softly but his lips were trembling and he did not dare look her in the face. Sergei appeared in the doorway, chewing a cheesecake.

"Oh, a sentimental interlude!" he guffawed. "I was told to call you in to tea..."

III

The boats floated along by the reeds under the willows. In the leading boat sat Vera, Sergei and Mishuka, who was rowing, plunging oars heavy from waterweeds deeply into the water. Looking at Vera from under his wet eyebrows Mishuka wheezed and thought to himself that there he was—rowing, humiliating himself on account of a chit of a girl.

"It's hot," he said, wiping his moustache.

"Uncle Misha, let me take the oars." Vera rose, the boat began to rock and the people in the other boat shouted to her: "Vera, Vera, you'll fall!"

A frightened duck quacked in the reeds.

"No, I began rowing and I'll continue," said Mishuka. He liked Vera's legs in their openwork stockings and he liked the lace on her uplifted petticoats. "She's a hell of a fine girl," he thought. "An adopted child, the devil take it, no mother or father, in a hurry to get married . . . the devil take it."

Sergei sat with his legs tucked up under him, his aquiline-nosed face bent towards his shoulder, playing a mandolin. His cunning black eyes were gleaming merrily, he looked at the water with narrowed eyes and seemed to deliberately avoid looking at Vera. The sun was going to rest but it was still hot. The down from the lime trees fluttered about and settled on the mirrorlike surface of the water. For some time two dragonflies linked together, buzzed over Mishuka's head.

Far away in a summerhouse whose six columns were reflected in the water, sat Nikita.

"Nika," called out Vera loudly across the water, "is tea ready?" Under Mishuka's glance, however, she immediately turned red as she had done the day before and knitted her brows slightly.

"You have a very pretty voice, Vera," said Sergei strumming on his mandolin, "really, you have, it's very pretty. . . ."

Vera flushed a still deeper red and bit her lips. Mishuka smirked.

Their boat was overtaken by the other which was being steered by Auntie Osorgina, the one who could not ride in a carriage because the springs broke. She was dressed in a wide-cut lilac-coloured dress, a lace cap and gloves and was gazing sternly from under her heavy brows at Nounou, Chouchou and Bébé, her three daughters, who were rowing.

Nounou, small and plump, gave a sudden sob because she could not drag the heavy oars out of the waterweeds. Chouchou was bad-tempered by nature, she was thin and had a long red nose. Bébé, the youngest, who still wore her hair down although she was over twenty, rowed clumsily and capriciously, knowing that she was pretty—in the family she was considered beautiful and called capricious.

As they rowed past Auntie Osorgina said in a chesty bass: "Yes, young lady, it's time to eat and drink."

The boats rowed over to the summerhouse where Nikita sat, his cheek resting on his hand, at a tea table covered with a white cloth and set with blue china tea things.

The Misses Osorgina, with tiny squeaks and screams, raised their dresses and stepped ashore followed by their dignified mother; Vera and Sergei jumped out and Mishuka climbed heavily to the summerhouse making the stairs creak under his weight.

Vera sat down at the samovar. Her beautiful arms, bare to the elbow (Mishuka could not take his eyes off them), looked fresh and fragrant, like the tea she was pouring. Auntie Osorgina seated her three daughters by her side according to their ages.

"Two cups of tea with milk each and a piece of bread and butter," she ordered in her deep bass.

"A delightful pond, so romantic," said Bébé and threw her plaited hair over her shoulder to her back.

"Our pond is better than this only there are no boats," said Chouchou. "And our garden is better."

Nounou sat silent and sad but was eating heartily of her bread and butter until her mother said "Refrain!" to her.

Nikita sat apart from the others, silently adjusting his pince-nez and smiling into his teacup. Sergei had again taken up his mandolin. Vera handed him a plate of raspberries.

"You offended me in the boat," she whispered, "ask my pardon."

"Your lips are so close, I'll kiss you in a minute," whispered Sergei just as quickly and without looking up.

Mishuka suddenly raised the alarm.

"Either there will be whispering or there won't. If it's whispering, then let us all whisper..."

The Misses Osorgina giggled. Vera flushed a deep red and her moist eyes sparkled.

From behind the dark lime trees there rose the red line of a rocket which burst into a shower of stars. It spluttered out with a gasp in the air and scared the rooks nested in the willows.

"Beautiful illuminations, come along, let us have a good look at them," said Auntie Osorgina and led the way along the sagging boardwalk to the bank of the pond.

Everybody left the summerhouse. Its round roof and six peeling columns were now dimly reflected in the pond's dark waters faintly tinged with orange. It seemed better and more beautiful in the water, exactly as one of the Repiev ancestors had wished it to look when he built it to the memory of his wife who had died young. Carpenters from Galicia had hewn it out of the trees the dead woman loved and had plastered and painted it with Greek designs. In the middle was a plaster cupid, in one hand he held a lowered torch while the other covered weeping eyes. Over the entrance was an inscription, now almost rubbed away:

*"Friend of my lifetime, gone, alas,
All earthly things so swiftly pass . . .
Soon I'll be there where thou now art
So wait in peace for me, dear heart."*

Every evening great-grandfather Repiev would sit in this summerhouse alone with his thoughts and memories, whispering the name of his dear, departed companion. One autumn, when the pond was covered with fallen leaves, when a mist spread over the reeds and the ducks were flying away into the sorrowful glow of the setting sun, great-grandfather Repiev disappeared. He was found later with boat hooks, lying amongst the waterweeds at the bottom of the pond.

The multi-coloured lanterns were dying down amidst the damp foliage of the lime trees in the avenue. The yellowish moon could be seen through the branches hanging low over the garden. Girls from the village stood about in groups amongst the trees. They had just finished an old song which they had sung at Olga Leontievna's request and were now chewing sunflower seeds and using their elbows to fend off the village lads.

A Tatar fiddler was sitting on the ground, playing a sad and wild song of the steppes and rocking his shaved head with its skullcap back and forth. Olga Leontievna, Pyotr Leontievich, Osorgina and Chouchou sat listening to the Tatar playing. The others had gone to dress up. To everybody's astonishment Mishuka had gone with them.

"I don't like Mishuka today," whispered Olga Leontievna to her brother.

A shower of sparks came from the bushes, a rocket hissed, wound its way into the dark sky and burst high overhead. . . . The Tatar stopped sawing his bow and together with the girls and the guests followed the rocket with uplifted head.

"How beautiful that was," sighed Olga Leontievna as the rocket gave its dying gasp.

At last the party appeared in costume: Vera in a Turkish shawl and an old nightcap to represent a Turkish girl, Bébé was a fishergirl with her hair in a net and an oar in her hand, Nounou as "Night" wore a long black veil while Nikita, who

kept adjusting his pince-nez all the time, had dressed up as a coachman. Mishuka simply had a bedsheet thrown over his head. . . .

"I don't know what that costume is supposed to represent," said Olga Leontievna pointing to Mishuka. 7

Auntie Osorgina took a lorgnette from her bag and looked at him.

"That is a ghost," she said.

The Tatar played a Polish dance. Vera whirled round with Nikita, Nounou with Bébé and Mishuka remained alone, stamping his feet like a goose. A lantern amongst the branches caught fire and fell to the ground.

Suddenly a devil, dressed in a sheepskin, his face blackened with soot, leaped out of the bushes at the village girls. He leaped around just like a real devil, seized the beautiful but desperately howling Vasyonka and began to dance and whirl round with her . . .

Vera left Nikita and, fanning herself briskly, stood staring smilingly at Sergei, who was playing the devil, and at Vasyonka. Mishuka came closer to Vera.

"In my opinion that's a bit too much," he boomed in her ear. "There's nothing funny about it and it's undignified. . . ."

Vera did not listen to him but went up to Vasyonka, who was puffing and panting as she straightened her shawl; she took Vasyonka by the face, looked into her eyes, kissed them and then kissed her on the cheek.

"How pretty you are, Vasyonka."

Vasyonka broke away from her and ran laughing to hide behind the other girls.

Osorgina shook her head disapprovingly. The Misses Osorgina were whispering like aspen leaves. Olga Leontievna rose and invited the guests into the house to supper.

"Come on, Uncle Misha," said Vera suddenly to Mishuka.

She took him under the arm and led him across a glade

damp and silver-grey in the moonlight; she took him up to a bench and sat down.

"It is stuffy under the limes...."

"It's stuffy, yes," said Mishuka.

Vera leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Oh, Uncle Misha...."

"What?"

"I only said 'Oh'...."

"Vera?" wheezed Mishuka cautiously.

"What, Uncle Misha?"

He looked long at her delicate profile, pale in the moonlight and moved closer to her.

"What do you think of me?" he wheezed.

"I like you, Uncle Misha...."

Mishuka did not answer but clasped her in a bearlike grasp, stuck out his lips till he looked terrible and buried his lips and moustache in her neck, below her ear....

"Let's go to my house. To hell with them all! We'll get married. Listen, let's go."

Silently, looking him straight in the face, Vera struggled, scratched him till her nails broke, tore herself loose and drawing on her cap and shawl ran across the grass to the centre of the glade. Mishuka ran after her.

"You're mad," she cried, pressing her hands to her breast.

From the shadow behind a hedge of lilacs came Nikita. Mishuka stopped, turned sharply round and went back into the depths of the garden. Vera ran up to Nikita.

"Please take me back home. I am quite giddy and I don't know what from."

Nikita took Vera by the arm, walked a few steps and then said in a stammering whisper:

"I saw it, Vera...."

Her arm suddenly became heavy. Vera turned round and then lifted her face to him. In the moonlight he saw the tears running down her cheeks.

IV

Everybody left the garden except a few of the village girls who sat closely together on the grass in the linden avenue whispering and laughing softly. There were still three Chinese lanterns burning in the branches. One burst into flames and fell bouncing from the branches. The moon stood high in the heavens. Sergei, laying his sooty face on Vasyonka's knee, was telling frightful stories. The girls nudged each other, gasped in fright and giggled. . . .

"So Granddad Repiev sat at night in the summerhouse," continued Sergei in a low voice—Vasyonka's hand lay on his head and she stroked his hair or ran her fingers through it—"and there he sat and sat until suddenly he saw somebody coming towards him, walking across the water. . . ."

"Oh!"

"Vasyonka, did you nudge me?"

"Who's that touching me?"

"Keep quiet, girls!"

"She came on and on towards him, walking on the water, and Granddad grew afraid. He cringed into the corner of the summerhouse and did not dare move. . . . It was a moonlit night just like it is now. . . . The thing, the white thing, came nearer and nearer on the water. It stopped outside the summerhouse. Then Granddad saw that it was his dead wife coming to him. . . ."

"Oh, I'm scared."

"Who is it then, that keeps touching me?"

"Oh, stop it, you girls. . . ."

"Well, he shouldn't have looked at her, he should have closed his eyes. But he looked. Grandma smiled and pointed to her eyes with her finger. Granddad got up from the bench and went towards her. . . . He went out of the summerhouse, down the steps into the water. And Grandma laughed, beckoning him on as she flew over the water. . . . Granddad went in up to his waist and still she beckoned him on. The water was

already up to Granddad's neck but still he followed her. Ahead of him there was a whirlpool. Granddad began to swim, he wanted to catch her. But Grandma bent over him and then disappeared together with him under the water into the depths where there are great bewhiskered sheatfish. . . ."

The girls pressed close against each other.

"Sergei!" a voice suddenly called from amongst the bushes. The girls groaned softly in fright. Sergei raised his head.

"What do you want, Nikita?"

"I want you, please."

"I'll come in a minute."

"D'you know, there's been an unpleasant incident."

"Another incident."

Sergei unwillingly rose from the ground, jumped over the girls' legs and went towards the pond after Nikita.

"Oh, that Nalymov," said Sergei, laughing, when he heard the whole story. "Oh, that Mishuka. We must give him a lesson. Where is he now?"

"I think he's in the summerhouse. He went to Vera's window and called to her to come out and talk to him. He is sure she will come."

Nikita was slightly out of breath as he hurried after Sergei who strode rapidly across the wet grass. The moonlight flecked the black pond with spots of gold. Nalymov's white jacket showed up clearly in the summerhouse.

Sitting in the summerhouse, Mishuka was thinking that he was not a little bit afraid of the old Repievs, nevertheless he was in poor spirits.

"Two dogs after the same bitch," he thought, "so she strutted about with her tail up. . . . Scratches. . . . I can scratch, too. . . . The foundling—ought to be grateful—I promised to marry her. . . . And this is what I'll give Seryozhka and Nikita."

Mishuka looked gloomily at his hairy fist. Just then voices became audible. the bushes were pushed apart and he saw

Nikita's white jacket on the glade in front of the summer-house; beside Nikita Sergei strode rapidly and dauntlessly, his face as black as a devil's....

Mishuka rapidly counted up to ten and assumed that if Sergei did not reach the boardwalk by that time everything would be all right. Sergei did get there. Mishuka gulped.

"I want to know what it's all about," said Sergei impudently, standing in front of him.

"What's all what about?"

"I'm asking you: what is the meaning of your impudence to Vera?"

Nikita nodded his head sympathetically: yes, yes....

"Get to hell out of here, d'you hear me," answered Mishuka.

"With the greatest pleasure. But as a preliminary you and I have some shooting to do."

"What?" Mishuka got up.

Sergei struck him across the cheek and Mishuka sat down again, wheezing horribly; he straightened his elbows but his mind was working badly.

"Now, now," is all he said.

The Repiev brothers went away looking worried.

Mishuka, boiling with rage, remained seated on the bench, the sweat pouring down his temples and nose from under his cap.... At last he brandished his fist in the air and struck the table such a blow that the boards split.

The brothers took the case of dueling pistols and came running back to the pond: the summerhouse was empty.

"Nalymov, Mishka, Mishuka," shouted Sergei.

The only answer came from a rook in its nest high up amid the dark branches.

"What do you think of that! He's run away," said Sergei. "I'll get him, anyway."

He loaded the pistols and fired twice into the air....

Echoes from all sides rolled across the pond. The sleepy rooks began screaming. Laughing, the brothers turned back to the house. They were met by Vera who came out of a clump of acacias at a narrow part of the path. Her lips were trembling and her fingers were plucking at the fringe of the shawl on her breast.

"Forgive me, Nikita, Seryozha," she began, trying to stifle her gasps. . . .

"Good Lord, Verochka, what nonsense, go to bed," began Sergei; he saw her big round eyes full of tears and realized that something was going to happen which he did not want; lightly but firmly he pushed Vera aside, nodded to her, his eyes sparkling, and went away whistling.

Nikita remained with Vera. She slowly raised the shawl from her breast and covered the lower part of her face and her mouth.

"I suppose he has gone to wash," said Nikita, "he's covered with soot."

Vera looked up at the moon—her eyes were sad and so wonderful that if Nikita had not been so shy he would have asked permission to die at that very moment, so lovable were those eyes.

"Verochka. . . . Seryozha is very, very much in love with you," he faltered.

"All right, let's go home, Nikita dear."

Mishuka smashed his way through the bushes out of the thickest part of the garden and across the vegetable patches and the flower beds; cursing and swearing he stumbled over the ditches.

When the two shots rang out he immediately sat down.

"An insult, a mortal insult," he muttered, "help me, Holy Mother of God."

There were no more shots fired, no sound of a chase could be heard and Mishuka plucked up courage, began to curse again and on his way broke off the branches of the young

apple trees. At last he got out of those devilish ditches and walked along a grassy glade beside the pond. A grey horse, its iron shackles rattling as it moved, was grazing beside the water.

"And who do you belong to, you stinking bastard?" said Mishuka, thrusting out his jaw. He ran over to the horse, twisted its tail and with all his might pushed it over the bank into the water.

The horse, snorting and baring its teeth, swam towards the reeds; Mishuka's heart became lighter, he began to think more clearly.

"I'll take the woods away from them," he said suddenly, rubbing his nose. "I've left them alone long enough. They imagine the boundary runs along Chervivaya Gully, nonsense, it runs through the Orekhovy Hollow. There goes their Repiev Woods—phut!"

V

"We went to Moscow three times last year: we have a certain woman there, Sophia Ivanovna," said the Nalymov coachman, lying on the grass by the stable and chewing a straw. "She gets the young ladies for us. Some time ago she pushed Selipatra on to us—a skinny wench with a temper like the devil, but the master likes her. We brought her to the house and she immediately began kicking up a fuss: she started slinging all the other girls' stuff out of the window, their dresses and bags and things. The girls, Ha! Ha!, they ran out into the yard with nothing on but their shifts. And me and the master, we burst our sides laughing!"

"Your master's a godless Tatar, may the Lord forgive me," said a kindly milkmaid who was sitting on the grass beside the gardener.

"That's because he's got nothing else to think about," put in the gardener, "when a man's got nothing to do he always

runs after the skirts. I once knew a man who lived with six women—and he was a decent chap, too.”

The milkmaid sighed and adjusted her kerchief. The horses in the stables pawed the ground and crunched their hay.

The Nalymov coachman continued his story.

“On the last birthday our guests were drinking for two whole days and those who went out for the count were taken to the ice-cellar to recover. And then guess what our master thought of—he took the guests up to the girls. The guests, of course, were excited and the master whispered to me, ‘Go to the apiary and bring a tray full of bees.’ I brought the tray and stuck it in the window. Everybody knows that bees don’t like sinful doings and they began to sting the guests on the bare parts of their bodies—and all the guests were naked. Me and the master, we burst our sides laughing.”

The milkmaid spat.

“Yes,” said the gardener. “But our masters are decent people and just and do not go in for such sinful doings.”

“They are just small people.”

“And what if they are! And you, you slave, would do better to keep your mouth shut than to disgrace your master.”

The Nalymov coachman was going to answer the gardener but at that moment Mishuka approached the people on the grass.

“Harness up!” he shouted and turned his goggle-eyes on the gardener and the milkmaid. “What are you sitting there for, don’t you see who is before you?”

The milkmaid got up. The gardener continued sitting where he was, rolled a cigarette and lit it, the flame of the match showing up his black beard.

“Didn’t you hear me? Get up!” roared Mishuka.

“Go easy, master, you’re not in your own yard.”

Mishuka snorted and turned to the milkmaid.

“Who are you, woman?”

“A milkmaid, master.”

"Here's three rubles for you, you fool! Cut the cows' dugs. I'll give you another three rubles tomorrow. Understand?"

"What are you talking about, master, cut the cows' dugs!"

"That's what I say, cut them. Here's another half ruble for you."

"Take your money back, master.... What a sin, the Lord forgive me."

The horses were brought out. Mishuka climbed into the carriage, spat on the Repiev land and drove off; the air resounded to the melodious clamour of the Nalymov bells.

Everybody in the Répiev house had gone to bed but there was still a light in Pyotr Leontievich's window.

Every evening, before saying the night's prayers, Pyotr Leontievich went to his sister's room. At this time Olga Leontievna was either busy with the household accounts or was reading the leaf torn off the calendar for that day and wondering what nice meals she should order for the next day.

When Pyotr Leontievich kissed his sister's hand and gave her his hand to kiss he always said the same thing:

"Don't forget to say your prayers, my dear."

This was what he did today. As Pyotr Leontievich kissed his sister's hand he said: "Don't forget to say your prayers, my dear"; he went unhurriedly to his own room, closed the door softly and suddenly noticed a cockroach on the white stove.

Pyotr Leontievich pulled off his high boots and with a groan climbed up on to the shelf of the stove where he began saying a charm. The cockroach waved its antennae and fell.

"That's better," said Pyotr Leontievich.

Then he got down from the stove. It was at this moment that the two shots resounded in the distance. Pyotr Leontievich opened his window and listened.

For a long time after the shots the garden was quiet and then voices approached the window, a man's and a woman's,

"But, my dear, what can I do? I can't go on."

"Of course, of course, Verochka, you're right, you're quite right...."

"Don't be angry with me, Nikita...."

"I say again, you're quite right, there is no other answer you could give me."

"Good night, Nikita."

"Sleep well, Verochka."

The door on the balcony slammed to. For a time Pyotr Leontievich stood blinking in the darkened window. Through the walls he heard footsteps and the creaking of a bed. Vera had gone into her room and had begun to cry, at first softly but gradually getting louder and louder. She blew her nose. Pyotr Leontievich threw on a jacket and tapped at Vera's door.

"So you're crying," he said, sitting down in front of her and tapping his foot on the floor.

"Go away, uncle."

"Of course, I'll go away soon, but first tell me what you're crying about—does your head ache?"

"Yes, it does."

"Who fired the shots?"

"Seryozha."

"At whom?"

"At the rooks."

"Now, now, Verochka," Pyotr Leontievich placed his hand on her head, "my dear child."

"What, uncle," Vera burst out crying still louder and lay with her face hidden in the pillow.

"Do you love Seryozha very much?"

"Yes."

"I'll fix all that up," said Pyotr Leontievich thoughtfully. "D'you know what—you go to sleep and I'll go back to my own room and think it out. In the morning I'll go for a walk with you in the grove. We'll sit on the grass, you'll cry a bit, we'll talk things over and everything will be all right."

Pyotr Leontievich kissed Vera, went back to his room and stood in front of the icons where lamps and wax candles were burning; for a long time he could not gather his thoughts together in order to say his prayers but stood smiling into his beard.

VI

Mishuka arrived at his house at dawn with the horse bells tied up; he left the horses at the stable and went up the back staircase to the girls' room in the attic with the idea that if he came in quietly, he would catch the girls up to some mischief.

"Ho, ho, now I'll get them, now I'll get them," he thought, trying to work up a fury. The stairs creaked. He kicked open the door of the girls' room and looked round savagely.

All was quiet and sleepy in the stuffy room where a half a light came through the rose-coloured curtains. Fimka and Bronka lifted their tousled heads from their pillows—they slept in one bed—saw their formidable master and immediately hid under the blanket.

"Get up!" shouted Mishuka.

Maria, smacking her lips and but half awake, stretched herself till all her joints cracked, yawned, looked at the master and clapped her hands to her mouth. Dunya turned over displaying her bare side. Cleopatra lay motionless on her back, covering her eyes with her sharp elbows.

"Vodka," said Mishuka to the sleepy-eyed Vanyushka who appeared in the door, "and something to eat. Get a move on!"

Going over to Cleopatra he said. "Rub the sleep out of your eyes, you old crow!"

He ordered the girls to stay in their shirts and not to dress. He took off his coat and seated himself on the sofa by the table, wheezing and looking round savagely until Vanyushka came in with a tray on which were delicacies of all kinds, a

huge decanter of vodka and a round goblet belonging to Mishuka's great-grandfather.

Mishuka spread his elbows and set about his meal. He filled the goblet, shook pepper into it, drank it up slowly, frowning horribly all the while, and then stabbed his fork into a big pickled mushroom that took his fancy.

Maria opened her eyes wide and followed the pieces of fish steak and ham, whole pickled cucumbers and patties smeared with caviare as they found their way into Mishuka's mouth. Fimka and Bronka stood by the stove, shifting their weight from one foot to the other and slobbering at the mouth. Cleopatra sat with her legs crossed, her shift slipping down over her shoulders, and smoked swiftly and furiously. Dunya was adjusting her long hair. Mishuka suddenly choked on his food, snorted and burst out laughing, shaking the table with his fat belly.

Dunya immediately ran over to him, sat on his knee and began to pet him.

"I felt so sleepy but when I saw you the sleep left me. What are you laughing at?"

"Toady!" snapped Cleopatra, blowing smoke through her nose.

"How that gelding . . . how I shoved that gelding into the water," spluttered Mishuka. "The gelding was their favourite, it's an old animal, they give it an easy time, and I shoved it into the water. . . ."

Fimka and Bronka puckered up their mouths, wiped them and smiled, as Mishuka got up from the table, stretched himself, still smiling. Dunya looked him ingratiatingly in the eyes.

"Will you lie in my bed?"

Mishuka did not answer but went straight to Fimka and Bronka, seized them by their hair and banged their heads together. The girls squawked and sat down. Then he went up to Maria and slapped her fat back. Maria gasped.

"Oh, good Lord!"

"Never mind," said Mishuka, "that's what I keep you for, you fat cow."

This was followed by tussles and horseplay. Mishuka was rolled over, roaring with laughter, by the crowd of girls that fell on him; he dragged them by their legs and their hair, rolled on the floor and gasped. The floor boards shook and the chandeliers rattled pitifully in the dimly lit drawing room below, a room that contained gilded mouse-eaten furniture, and the portraits of ladies and gentlemen in powdered wigs, and was always kept locked.

Mishuka, tousled and perspiring but comforted and happy, descended the inner staircase to his study where he lay down on the sofa and slept.

A heavy storm approached towards evening, the air was close and thundery. A fine warm rain fell straight down and rustled faintly on the leaves of the trees. Now and again a distant, bluish light lit up the windows.

Mishuka was sitting on the sofa with his hand under the sharp, pointed head of his favourite hor/oi bitch, Snowball, and listening to the dreamy monotonous swishing of the rain that came through the open windows in the twilight.

Snowball turned her goggle-eyes on her master and again lowered her sleepy lids. At every clap of thunder she turned towards the window and growled. Mishuka stroked her head and thought about what had happened the evening before.

It was only now, sitting in the rainy twilight, that he realized that the day before he had been given a terrible insult, that people had made fun of him and had then thrown him over, had struck and frightened him and threatened to shoot him.

Mishuka even growled when he realized all this to the full.

"They don't respect me, Nalymov. . . . They slap my face, me, Mikhal Mikhalyeh Nalymov—they insult me. . . . If I feel

like it I'll turn the whole gubernia upside down. And they ... me ... Me—those ...”

He pushed the dog off his knee. Snowball whined weakly, crawled under the sofa and began to lick herself and snap at fleas with her teeth. Mishuka sat with his legs apart gazing at the indistinct patches of the portraits on the wall. Something had to be done: anger was gnawing at his heart. Mishuka wanted to think of how he would tear off Vera's dress and horse-whip Seryozha—but these thoughts did not help him.

He rose heavily from the sofa and began to walk up and down the study. “Aha, you ignore me, well, all right, then... ” He picked up a blotting press and smashed it on the floor. “All right, ignore me.” The hollow crash resounded through the empty house. Mishuka stood still and listened—everything was quiet. He took up an agricultural journal that had been bound in one volume for five years—it weighed a goodly eighty pounds—and threw that on the floor as well. Another crash resounded through the house and then silence again—nobody responded.

“The scoundrels, they're not concerned about their master... All they think of is thieving. All they want is to get money out of their master,” thought Mishuka and suddenly remembered with disgust the recent tussle in the attic.

“Sluts!” he suddenly shouted out loud, “I'll show you whether you can sit on me! ... Vanyushka!”

Mishuka crossed the dark room to the servants' quarters and shouted:

“Vanyushka, run to the stables and tell them that the master orders horses to be harnessed to two carts—and hurry. And send the steward to me... Hurry, you son-of-a-bitch! ...”

The rain poured in through the deliberately opened windows of the attic where the girls, tousled and disheveled were sobbing as they tied up into bundles their dresses, underclothes and sundry cheap trinkets. Dunya was already downstairs sit-

ting under a horse blanket in the cart, silent in her anger. Workers, soaking wet, passed by with lanterns, laughing at the girls. The rain splattered noisily in the tall poplars and formed big puddles. Maria, her face swollen from crying, came running from the porch, slipped and fell, her bundle flopping into a puddle, the workers roared, Maria whined and climbed into the cart. Inside the house Mishuka stood on the stairs leading to the attic, slapping his whip against the shaft of his boot.

"Out of here, you filthy sluts," he shouted.

Fimka and Bronka, eyes wide open from fright, came tumbling down the stairs; Mishuka for a joke crack'd his whip across their backs.

"Oh, Lord, they're killing us," screamed Fimka and Bronka as they splashed through the puddles to the carts.

They were put into the carts and covered with mats to keep the rain off.

"Kick her out, kick out the old crow," shouted Mishuka. The steward and Vanyushka finally dragged Cleopatra out. She fought them savagely all the time, bit their hands, twisted and turned, wild as a witch.

"You're fooling yourself," she said hoarsely to Mishuka, baring her teeth, "you can't kick me out, I won't go, I'm not your dog. . . ."

At last Cleopatra was put on the cart. The carts moved off. The workers, laughing loudly and waving their lanterns over the grass, went to their own quarters and were soon lost to sight behind a curtain of falling rain. Mishuka, finally satisfied with the outcome of the last two days and having taken vengeance for all insults given him, went into the house.

Not even the groom on the leading cart saw Cleopatra slip out of the second cart at a bend in the waterlogged road and hide behind the bushes in the garden.

VII

Pyotr Leontievich went into the boys' room, as it was still called from force of habit. Like all the rooms in the Repiev house it was high, had plastered walls and contained furniture that had suffered from the ravages of mice and moths. On the wall over the sofa hung the outspread wings of ducks, bustards, hawks and blackbirds that had long since become thoroughly impregnated with dust. When anybody went into the room with a candle he got the impression of headless monsters crawling up the wall. The trophies belonged to Sergei, who never allowed anybody to touch them. When he had been presented with his first gun some twelve years before he had used it from dawn till dusk shooting at everything in the garden, on the pond and in the fields until both the house and the garden had stunk so badly from the carrion that Olga Leontievna decided not to go out of her bedroom.

As he glanced up smiling at the black wings on the wall Pyotr Leontievich thought of the past. Those had been good times. So many nice people had been alive then. Seryozhà and Nikita, both fine boys, were full of promise. Dear Mashenka had been alive then, always dressed in white, always kindly, always worried about how to feed her guests better, how to marry off some one of her near relations or how to straighten out some unpleasantness.

Every day there was the noise of guests in the dining room or on the balcony; their uncle, old Nalymov, often came—he was a great joker and in order to astound everybody used to bite off a big piece of melon dipped in snuff. Olga used to come in from her excursions, beautiful, jolly and mysterious, dressed in a velvet riding habit. She would strip off her long gloves and offer her hand to be kissed. . . . There were many, very many young men in love with Olga Leontievna in those days. . . . But everything had faded away like a mist, gone were the good old days. . . .

At that time Pyotr Leontievich had tried to set his sadly bedraggled affairs to rights: he had built a cloth mill but had not insured it, believing insurance to be the greatest of sins. A man should stand naked before his God like Job and should not take out insurance on his fortune. The mill burnt down. Pyotr Leontievich then thought of building a factory to preserve crayfish. There were untold numbers of them in the Chermashnya River, they broke the nets and sometimes village boys bathing in the river were nipped in the stomach and other parts of the body.

He build the crayfish factory and even ordered two majolica figures from Moscow to place at the entrance. Ten thousand jars with the factory mark on them were made and it was intended to send jars of preserved crayfish direct to the big cities. The crayfish in the Chermashnya River, however, were suddenly stricken with the plague and died out completely. This was almost complete ruin.

Pyotr Leontievich then began to think of something more suited to this age of steam and electricity and built a horse-drawn flatiron for clearing snowbound roads.

Landlords and peasants came from miles around to see the huge flatiron forcing its way through snowdrifts amid clouds of steam and melting the snow with its hot sides. Six pair of horses dragged it for more than a verst. It was a frosty day and Pyotr Leontievich went flying down the road in a racing sled which upset, threw him out and dislocated his leg.

He ordered the iron to be placed in a shed and since then had not invented anything else for his estate. Solomino, and Trianon as well, went under the hammer and he was forced to take his boys into permanent residence with his sister at Repievka and live out his days in peace and quiet.

Wrapt entirely in his memories Pyotr Leontievich stood twisting his snuffbox in his hands and did not notice Sergei enter the room.

"Did you want me, Papa?"

"Yes, I came to see you, young man. Close the door."

Sergei smiled, closed the door and stood before his father looking into his eyes with a faint smile on his face. Pyotr Leontievich took his son by the arm and screwed up his nose.

"Seryozha, tell me honestly, are you capable of loving anybody?"

"I am sure I am, Papa."

"You see, it's like this. Oh, Seryozha, if you only realized what a wonderful woman that is. You really are not worthy of her love.... You know, there's something in your eyes that is quite new to me, some sort of irresponsibility...."

"You want to ask me whether I love Vera?" asked Sergei, derisively, almost angrily.

"Steady, steady, you're always running ahead.... I said there is an air of irresponsibility about you.... Vera is a wonderful girl, a treasure, such a kindly and beautiful soul. But it is dangerous to scare her. If you scare her she will withdraw into herself for the rest of her life, d'you understand? ... You have to be very considerate with her. I have become a matchmaker, you see, my boy...."

Sergei walked up and down the room with his head bent. Pyotr Leontievich turned round and round towards him like a sunflower towards the sun and all the time blinked in a manner that showed he was growing more and more afraid. Sergei stood still in front of his father, did not look at him, but said firmly:

"I am sorry but I cannot marry Vera."

"You can't, Seryozha?"

"I greatly respect and love Vera. That's true. But still I can't marry her. What should we live on? Depend on Auntie Olga? Work as a clerk in the Zemstvo? Bring up a dozen children? I'm a beggar."

Pyotr Leontievich smiled pitifully and looked down at his own feet. Sergei again began to walk up and down.

"I am going to Africa," he said.

"So, so. . ."

"To the Transvaal. In the first place nobody there has ever seen me before. In the second place there are diamonds and gold there. And Vera"—again he stood still and his black eyes flashed—"let Vera marry Nikita. That would be a good thing in every way. It would be honest, I think."

VIII

Vera sat toying with the piano keys. Olga Leontievna, her knitting lying on her lap, was looking out of the window at the oncoming twilight. Nikita sat silent by the wall, his elbows resting on his knees. The birds in the garden had grown quiet. Vera kept striking the same note—middle E—softer and softer and then stopped and closed the lid of the piano softly.

"I'm going to St. Petersburg," she said after a pause. "I'll enter college, cut my hair short and wear an English fustian blouse."

"Stop it, Vera," said Olga Leontievna quietly.

"All right, I won't go anywhere. won't cut my hair and won't wear an English blouse."

Nikita got up cautiously from his chair, stood for a moment indistinct in the twilight and then left the room on tiptoe. Vera laid her head on the cold piano.

"Oh," sighed Olga Leontievna noisily, "how silly you all are."

"Does that include me, Auntie?"

"Judge for yourself."

"Auntie Olya," said Vera, without lifting her head, "am I very silly?"

"I think I'll go to my own room and lock myself up, away from you all."

"I'm sorry for Nikita, Auntie Olya.... He is so ... sad. I think I would do anything to make him get over it."

Olga Leontievna was immediately on her guard.

"Verochka, do you really mean that?"

Vera did not answer; her face could not be seen. Olga Leontievna went quietly over to her and stood behind her back.

"I know myself how hard it is to be jilted—that is something that even the most beautiful woman always has to fear—some men don't appreciate treasures, that's all." Olga Leontievna paused. "There is one other treasure that you must never lose, Vera. Your soul must always be pure. Everything passes, love, happiness, insults, but the soul that is true to its own purity will come unscathed through all trials.... Your sufferings now are cleansing your soul." Olga Leontievna even raised a finger, her voice grew stronger. "Your tribulations have been sent you...."

"Auntie Olya, I don't know what you are talking about, what tribulations?"

Olga Leontievna did not answer. She took Vera's head gently, pressed it to her and gave her a long kiss on her hair.

"D'you think that we old people have known so much happiness? Our youth was filled with sighs."

Vera sat up straight and slowly removed Olga Leontievna's hand from her shoulder.

"All right, I will stay with you always. I don't want to get married, that was only a joke."

"Oh, you're talking nonsense." In her despair Olga Leontievna even nudged her. "I don't want any sacrifices from you. I am not trying to send you to a convent."

"Then what do you want from me?"

Olga Leontievna seemed to grow smaller. Vera again bent her head. There was not a rustle in the house. If the wind had rustled the leaves in the garden, perhaps Vera would not have said what her aunt wanted her to say. There was just the same stillness of night in the garden, however, as though the whole

world were holding its breath. Vera spoke in a whisper that was scarcely audible.

"All right. I'll marry Nikita."

Without speaking Olga Leontievna clapped her hands. She walked away on tiptoe but outside the door her footsteps sounded light and merry—she seemed to be flying.

Nikita came in. He stood by the stove. Vera, still sitting in the same attitude, spoke without raising her head.

"D'you know?"

"Yes, I know, Vera."

"So that's that, Nikita."

She got up from the piano stool. She took Nikita's head between her hands and touched his forehead with her lips.

"Good night."

"Good night, Verochka."

"Bring me something to read."

"Would you like a new magazine?"

"Anything."

Nikita stood for a long time looking at the door, almost invisible in the twilight, behind which Vera's lightly rustling dress had disappeared. Then he sat on the piano stool and trembled in silence.

Vera lay on the low, chintz-covered sofa, an open book before her; she was not reading, however. A candle burned under a paper shade decorated with black manikins. Vera's eyebrows were drawn together, her dry eyes wide open. She kept raising herself on to one elbow and listening.

Several times already Sergei's voice had whispered "Vera, Vera," from behind the bushes in the garden. She did not answer, did not turn to look, but she felt that he was standing at the window.

Then suddenly she jumped up. Sergei was standing outside the window, his arms on the sill. He looked at her with his flashing eyes and laughed.

"What do you want?" asked Vera, shaking her head. "Go away, go away from me."

Sergei jumped lightly on to the window sill and held out his hands. Vera looked at his short, strong fingers. He took her by the elbow and put his arms round her. Vera sat on the window sill, closed her eyes and did not speak. A deep shadow seemed to pass over her face.

"I love you, darling," said Sergei through his teeth. "Don't drive me away, don't be obstinate."

Vera sighed softly and lowered her head on to Sergei's shoulder. He bent over her but his lips brushed across her cheek.

"Don't, Seryozha, don't."

She could feel how fast his heart was beating. She could feel each heart beat with her breast, with her own heart. Sergei seized her by the shoulders and began kissing her neck.

"May I come in, Vera, may I?"

"No." She threw back her head and looked him in the face, straight into his bloodshot eyes. "Don't touch me, Seryozha, I shall weaken."

He pressed his lips to hers. She could feel his fingers unfastening the hooks on her dress. Slowly and with difficulty she broke away from him. He fell with his head on her knees, his breath was hot. His fingers still continued unfastening the dress.

"Seryozha," she said, "leave me alone. I promised myself to Nikita today. I am his fiancée."

"Vera, Vera, that's very good . . . you know I can't marry you. . . . So much the better. . . . Marry him, marry him, it doesn't matter, you're still mine."

"Seryozha, what are you talking about?"

"Don't be silly, you don't love him and he won't be. . . ."

"What, what?"

"He won't know anything about it. Don't you understand

he'll be happy with the very smallest of your kindnesses.... But I, Vera.... I'll go mad.... Everybody does it...."

Sergei leaped into the room, blew out the candle and again took Vera tightly in his arms. She was like a block of stone. He whispered in her ear, sought her lips, but she struck him stubbornly and sharply in the chest with her elbow. Vera broke free from him.

"It's getting late," she said as she moved away from him. "I want to go to bed. Good night."

In a whisper Sergei called on the devil and then disappeared through the window. Vera did not light the candle; lay down on the sofa again, her face in one pillow and another pillow on her head and she cried as she had never cried in her life before.

IX

A seamstress appeared in the house, there were sounds of tearing calico, her sewing machine rattled and with her dry lips pressed together she went into consultations with Olga Leontievna.

Nikita went to Simbirsk several times and visited the Chancery Council and the Bank of the Nobility. The house was redecorated, the carriage was reupholstered.

Vera lived quietly through all those days and rarely left her room. She sat at the window with a book and looked out at the blue water of the pond, at the yellow and green patches of corn on the hillsides, and listened to the birds in the garden singing their songs of an ancient sorrow.

Sergei went shooting every day, returning late with a full bag and smelling of forest, swamp and bird down. He looked at Vera in unpleasant derision and at supper greedily ate a lot.

Pyotr Leontievich had grown more silent than ever and took snuff all the time.

One day Sergei went with his gun and his dog to the Nalymov woods, into the densest part where the ground was boggy. His pointer wagged her tail amongst the ferns and from time to time turned her intelligent, excited face to her master. Sergei caught his feet on fallen branches, stumbled through patches of open swamp, the dog's tail wagging ahead of him all the time. Sergei kept thinking gloomily of Vera without any relief.

How many dozens of versts he had tramped those last few days in order to soothe the pain, to quench that mad desire that was in him! Nothing helped him.

"Ph-r-r-r." A black grouse rose into the air. Sergei fired without even a glance. A few leaves fell from a tree. The pointer ran forward by leaps and bounds and looked about, wagging its ears from out of a bunch of fern.

Almost immediately a horn was sounded not far off. Branches cracked and a raucous voice roared through the trees.

"Who's that shooting in my wood, may your soul be damned! Who dares loiter in my wood?"

Sergei looked round him quickly. Not far off in a glade stood a huge, ancient oak that was mentioned in all the chronicles of the Repiev and Nalymov families—hollow, rugged and with many branches like an heraldic tree.

At that same moment Mishuka, mounted on a roan mare, came bursting through the bushes on the other side of the glade. Waving his brass horn above his head he shouted to his dogs.

"Sock him, you sons-of-bitches, sock him!"

Two pairs of the Nalymov animals, red and white harriers, made straight for the pointer. The dog squealed and cringed at Sergei's feet and he seized it and thrust it into the hollow tree; then he jumped up and grabbed the lowest branch, pulled himself up and scrambled rapidly to the top of the tree.

"Sock him, you sons-of-bitches, u-lu-lu," shouted Mishuka, his face flushed red in anger. He rode up to the oak, circled

round it, stood up in his stirrups and slashed at the foliage with his whip. "Get down out of my tree this minute. . . ."

"Uncle Misha, don't get so excited," chuckled Sergei climbing still higher, "you'll upset your digestion and that's bad for you." He threw down an acorn which hit Mishuka in the belly.

"I'll kill you! I'll whip you to death! Get down, I tell you! . . ." roared Mishuka.

"You'll never get at me, Uncle Misha. you'll get fed up with waiting and you'll get hungry."

"I'll have the tree cut down."

"It's hundreds of years old, it's sacred."

"Get down, I order it, I, the elected marshal of the nobility in this district."

"I didn't vote for you, Uncle Misha, I never go to elections."

"Rebel! I'll order the police to get you down. I'll have you flogged."

"Uncle Misha, you'll burst." Sergei threw another acorn which struck Mishuka's cap.

The hounds leaped and jumped howling in their fury. The pointer snarled, stuck her nose out of the hollow and snapped her teeth. Mishuka and Sergei cursed each other for a long time until the amusement began to pall. At last Sergei spoke in more peaceful tones.

"Why get angry with me, Uncle Misha. They've also made me a long nose. Vera is marrying Nikita."

"You are lying," said the astonished Mishuka.

"Instead of cursing each other, it would be better to go to the farmstead together. We could have a drink there."

"Have you got anything to drink?"

"A couple of quarts of vodka."

"Hm," said Mishuka, "that's all very well. Still, you're a scoundrel."

"That's also true, Uncle Misha."

Apparently Mishuka was quite pleased with the idea of going to the farmstead for a drink after all the excitement.

Sergei came a bit lower down the tree, winked at Mishuka and made a universally understood gesture.

"We can get that as well."

Mishuka threw back his head and roared with laughter, holding on to his saddle. Then he struck the mare with his whip and galloped away to the farmstead.

An hour later Mishuka and Sergei were sitting together in a warmly heated log cabin—Mishuka unbuttoned his coat and drank vodka by the tumblerful, perspired freely and made the table shake with his fat belly.

"Ha, ha ... you're bold to come here, Seryozha."

"We have nothing to quarrel about, Uncle Misha, I like you...."

"So you say...."

"I like you, Uncle Misha, you have something of the old Russian titan about you, not like the gentily of today, filthy bastards, small people...."

"Little people, you call them, ha, ha, ha...."

"You, Uncle Misha, are like one of the princes of olden times.... You have strength...."

"A titan, you call me, a prince? Ha, ha, ha...."

"Let's go to Africa together, Uncle Misha. Oh, what couldn't we do there! ..."

"To Africa? Ha, ha, ha...."

"It's a pity I have no money, Uncle Misha, there I could manage something...."

"You're a scoundrel. Seryozha.... I'll give you money and a good hiding as well, ha, ha...."

A vigorous, husky young peasant woman, her whole face rosy, her eyes grey and merry, came into the room. She sat boldly down beside Mishuka and nudged him with her elbow. Mishuka only gasped. Then the feasting began, even the timbers of the log cabin creaked and rattled,

X

Since early morning Olga Leontievna and Nikita had been touring the shops in Simbirsk, a carriage following them with their purchases. The horses were in a kind of stupor and the coachman had by some miraculous means succeeded in getting drunk without leaving his seat. Nikita mournfully dragged behind his aunt from shop to shop. He did not feel there was any need for this fuss or for the things they had bought. He could buy up the whole of Simbirsk, he could dash himself against the stones and smash his head—Vera would not be the happier for it, her former vitality, the flash of her eyes and her merry laugh would not return: she did not love him, she did not love. . . .

"Come, come, young man, you're like a dying duck in a thunderstorm, you're drooping," Olga Leontievna told him, "a groom who cannot stay a moment without his bride but what he gets downcast. . . . All right, all right, we'll go home soon."

Auntie ran across the street to a shoemaker whose tousled head was bobbing up and down at his window—he was also drunk. . . . The horses and Nikita stood despondently waiting in the hot street. The coachman kept belching loudly and every time he belched he looked round scared.

"Oh, Lord," he muttered, "here's a fine to do!"

By evening Olga Leontievna had finally calmed down; she climbed into the carriage, counted her purchases several times over and waved her hands to the coachman.

"To the ferry, Ivan. Only don't forget to hold the horses on the hill, you're quite drunk."

"Good Lord," answered the coachman, "there's been no chance of a drink, I've been in front of your eyes all day long," and he belched so loudly that he could be heard all down the street; "what a fine to-do!"

They drove away downhill to the Volga ferry.

It was getting dark on the river and lights flashed out on

the buoys and on the masts of the vessels. A paddle steamer splashed through the water in the distance. A mournful sunset was dying out over the low-lying farther bank of the Volga, over the trans-Volga region. On the bank the stalls loaded with cakes, the lemonade booths and stalls where women sold baked, salted and boiled comestibles were lit up very cosily. The river-bank was redolent with the odours of hot bread, tar, hay and the river. The strains of a brass band came from the distant Venets Hill—the usual evening promenade had begun in the town gardens. They were playing a waltz or something like it that drifted sadly across the evening sky.

The ferry was just turning round an island and approaching the bank: it was a mass of heads, carts, sacks and bundles—for all the world like an anthill.

The fenders made of faggots on the sides of the vessel creaked, the office booth on the floating landing stage rocked, voices grew noisier, horseshoes clattered on the wooden decks—pushing and cursing, the drivers began getting their carts ashore.

A pair of spirited black horses, harnessed to a light phaeton, were squeezed between the sides of the wagons and were snorting in alarm. They trotted out on to the sand, the wheels whirring softly. Olga Leontievna ran swiftly towards the phaeton screaming wildly.

“Vera!”

The closely-muffled, dark figure in the phaeton turned sharply round. The coachman pulled his horses up sharply.

“What’s the matter with you? You don’t look yourself! What’s happened?” asked Olga Leontievna, pushing her way through the crowd towards Vera.

“Nothing has happened,” said Vera coldly in a trembling voice. “I did not come after you, I am going for a ride. Good-bye.”

Silently Olga Leontievna seized the shaft horse by the bridle and turned the phaeton towards the ferry; she ordered Nikita

to stay in his carriage and look after the parcels there and she herself got into the phaeton beside Vera.

"Where is the parasol?" she asked and took it and opened it for no reason whatever; she closed the parasol again and pushed it under the box. "Thank you, my dear, that was a nice trick to play on me."

Vera simply bowed her head lower and wrapped herself up to the eyes in her fluffy shawl.

XI

For three days before the wedding the Repiev relatives kept arriving at Krasnov Hotel in Simbirsk.

Day and night loud shouts came from the room in which the half-dressed landowners were playing cards.

An unusual quantity of wine was drunk—and still more brandy. The bottles were stacked up there in the hotel rooms to astound all who came in.

Frantic waiters were quite out of their minds as they ran along corridors hazy from tobacco smoke. Idlers thronged the square in front of the hotel, attracted by the noise and the lights.

"The trans-Volga landowners are on the rampage," they said to each other.

Not one of the ladies would risk venturing into the part of the hotel reserved for men, on account of the cavalry attacks in the passages. Young soldiers—cornets, ensigns and gentlemen-ranker volunteers from the guards' regiments—dressed in their night clothes, sat astride chairs and dashed about the rooms on them waving their swords. Their commander was Mstislav Khodansky, a Pavlograd Hussar and Vera's cousin. The cavalry attacked passers-by in the passages, grabbed the women and took the batteries of brandy bottles by storm.

The landowners whose buttocks had grown weary of sitting over the cards went out in the mornings just as they were—deshabille—for a breath of fresh air in the town gardens where

they upset the benches, fought one another and shook the trees. The simple townspeople were horrified as they came to their windows still half asleep to watch these games.

On the fourth day the whole of Simbirsk was bathed in the fumes of wine and spirits. The police captain had to be taken to a pine forest across the Volga to recover. The landlord Okoyemov saw a devil looking out of the round vent of the stove. The idlers on the square swore to God that they had heard people neighing like horses in one of the hotel rooms.

At last the groom arrived followed by Olga Leontievna with her brother and the bride. Many buckets of ice-cold water were required to sober the drunken heads of the guests. At two o'clock the whole of the Repiev family gathered in the cathedral.

Sergei and Mstislav Khodansky held the crowns.* The bride was pale and sad but indescribably beautiful. The groom kept worriedly putting his hand to his ear and asking the priest to repeat what he had said. Olga Leontievna looked sternly at her relatives: some of them were standing glumly, staring at the flickering light of the candles, others had begun to crack jokes.

The young couple went straight to a steamer from the church. Here the whole Repiev family drank champagne and hurled the glasses into the water. The steamer snorted and cast off. Vera took out her handkerchief, waved it to the people on shore and then put it to her eyes. Nikita smiled confusedly and it was obvious that he did not understand what was going on and did not see anything.

The relatives went back to the hotel to feast. In the galleries at each end of the huge banqueting hall there was an orchestra. After the first toast to the "swallows that had flown away" Olga Leontievna wept. It was at that moment that Mishuka walked importantly into the banqueting hall. He was wearing a

* At a wedding in the Russian Orthodox Church crowns are held over the heads of the bride and bridegroom throughout the ceremony.

long black coat buttoned up to the chin. His face was yellow and bloated and there were bags under his eyes.

He cast a dull glance over the long table. Everybody rose. Olga Leontievna's hands shook. Mishuka kissed her hand and then went and kissed Pyotr Leontievich who did not even have time to wipe his moustache; he then sat down without looking at anybody else and poured himself out a huge glass of vodka....

The orchestras in the galleries were about to play a polka but Baldryasov, a government clerk on special duty who was acting as master of ceremonies, hushed them, glared with an air of suffering at the musicians and, standing on tiptoe called for silence.

Mishuka ate half a pike, a good-sized piece of goose, frowned and pushed his plate away.

"Although my niece insulted me," he began in a hoarse, loud voice as he stood up to his full height, "although I said that I would not come to the wedding, I am here. I drink to the bride's health. Hurrah! I shall not drink for the groom, he can drink for himself. And as for me I'm going to die soon, so that's that."

He sat down heavily.... In a monotonous tenor Baldryasov shouted "Hurrah!" The musicians in the galleries began to play and created such a drunken uproar that even Mishuka looked up at them and muttered: "What canaille!"

The banquet lasted till dawn. At the request of the ladies the tables were removed and dancing began; cadets were invited from the local army school to provide partners. Card tables were set up. The young people crowded into the buffet. Mishuka wandered about amongst the guests, gloomy, heavy in his movements and frowning disdainfully. Only once did he brighten up—that was on the occasion of an incident that happened after midnight.

In the smoke and crush near the buffet Sergei approached Mstislav Khodansky, took him by the braids of his hussar's

jacket and spoke to him in a drunken voice, swaying as he did so.

"Stiva, I think your cousin did a wise thing, eh?"

Mstislav Khodansky immediately threw up his head—he was a tall, muscular man with black curls and he was pale from wine.

"Stiva," said Sergei again, "Vera is a clever woman, you understand?" He shook his finger in front of Khodansky's nose. "She is smart and her body is hot and cunning."

"Go away and sleep," said Khodansky.

"Stiva, d'you realize that if I had beckoned her with my finger she would have come running from the steamer..."

Mstislav Khodansky's nostrils quivered. Just then Mishuka came up and pointed his hairy hand at Sergei.

"Spit in his ugly mug, he's a swine."

"I see that," said Khodansky showing his even white teeth.

Sergei smiled unhappily and pushed Khodansky. Mstislav Khodansky seized him by the middle and threw him on to the plates on the sideboard. Broken glass was scattered on the floor. Mishuka roared with laughter.

"A fight, a fight," shouted someone as a crowd formed.

Somebody helped Sergei get down from the sideboard. Baldryasov wiped him down carefully with a handkerchief. Sergei smiled crookedly and turned his flashing eyes on Khodansky.

"All right, you'll answer for this."

"Aha, a duel, that's good," chuckled Mishuka.

A short time later the seconds met in Mishuka's room at the hotel. They drank a lot of brandy and discussed the conditions for the forthcoming duel—a discussion that was full of nonsense and disagreement.

"All rubbish," said Mishuka, "let them fight in my room."

The seconds sat down and drank. Holding each other by the lapels of their dress jackets they went into conference.

"This is an eminently suitable place for a duel," was their decision.

One of the seconds gave an unnatural shriek and slid under the table. A case of dueling pistols was brought in and the principals were called.

Sergei came in pale and glaring round the room. Mishuka pushed him over to the table.

"Take a drink of brandy before you die."

Mishuka himself loaded the pistols. The opponents were placed in opposite corners of the room. Mstislav stood there with his jacket unbuttoned, his legs apart and his magnificent head held high. Sergei was hunched up, his neck drawn in as he looked around him with a piercing glance.

"Gentlemen," said Mishuka holding the pistols high in front of him, "I hope that you do not want to make peace? No? You shouldn't, anyway. Shoot from your places on the command one, two, three."

He offered the pistols, first to Mstislav Khodansky and then to Sergei. He went into a corner and stood there gasping, very satisfied with the whole affair.

Two candlesticks placed on the floor lit up the two opponents.

The seconds sat down and covered their ears and one of them, holding his head in his hands, lay down on an ottoman.

"One, two," said Mishuka.

Just then the fourth second, a landowner by the name of Khrapovalov, a handsome man with black mutton-chop whiskers who was wearing high hunting boots with his dress suit, shouted out:

"Wait."

He took a piece of chalk from a card table, walked over to Khodansky and marked a cross on his chest and then went to Sergei and did the same to him.

"Now they may shoot."

Khrapovalov went to the wall and stood there with his arms folded.

"Three!" said Mishuka.

The two shots rang out together and the room was filled with smoke. The second who was lying on the ottoman silently waved his legs in the air.

"They're alive," said Mishuka in astonishment.

He took the chalk, turned Mstislav Khodansky round to face the wall and chalked a cross on his back.

"Shoot at this."

Then he chalked a cross on the seam of Sergei's dress coat. The opponents put the hands holding the pistols behind them. Mishuka began to command again.

"One, two. . . ."

Sergei staggered, said something unintelligible and collapsed on the carpet.

"He's finished," shouted Mishuka. "It's God's judgment."

Khodansky turned away from the wall and fired his pistol at a bottle of Veuve Cliquot. The grey smoke streamed towards Mishuka, he sneezed and moved his lips.

"Champagne. Horses. Let's go to the girls. . . . Pour some water over Seryozha and bring him to my carriage."

Early in the morning six three-horse carriages dashed through the peaceful streets of Simbirsk accompanied by whoops and whistling. The townsmen raised their heads and said to their sleepy wives:

"The trans-Volga on the rampage—Nalymov."

XII

Warmly heated stoves, a slight snell of well-washed floors, the winter light coming through frosted windows acted soothingly on Olga Leontievna in her declining days. The time passed away quietly in writing letters, in conversations held in low tones and in the unhurried waiting for news.

The firewood was spluttering in the tiled stove in a neat white room filled with soft light. Olga Leontievna was sitting at a little table near the window writing a long letter in her tiny pointed handwriting. She turned over the crackling paper and wrote across the lines:

"... I understand that constant melancholy—you do your best to make sure, go to see a doctor. I think you must be expecting. God grant it is so.

"When the baby is born see that you don't swaddle him, the English gave that up long ago, and, I'll tell you a secret, this is already the second month I have been sewing little shirts and diapers. You are young, you laugh at your old aunt but the aunt may still be useful....

"... You write that Nikita gets very tired at the office, sleeps badly and does not talk much. Don't worry, Verochka, that will pass. It's hard on him but he's a good fellow. Go to the theatre more often, they say the Alexandrine Theatre is very interesting. Get to know some nice people, make friends. You mustn't sit there like owls on Vasily Island without ever seeing anybody and just listening to the howling wind—Pyotr Leontievich and I have enough of that here at Repievka....

"... Pyotr and I are getting on in years. One thing worries me—my brother has begun seeing some sort of light at night. In the mornings he wakes up in ecstasies. He still works as he always did, sawing and turning. He recently thought out a very useful invention—a machine to keep off mosquitoes in the form of a squeaker. You put this squeaker in the garden, it begins to squeak and all the mosquitoes sit around on the leaves, they cannot fly away and die of hunger. It's a pity we can't test it, it's winter now and there are no mosquitoes. Laughter and tears.... And you, Verochka, be kind to Nikita, he loves you, loves you and will be faithful to the grave.... Eat the frozen chickens and the butter I sent you: I'll send another lot for Christmas."

The winter day came to an end. Cold, bluish shadows lay on the snow, the footprints in the snow became more sharply outlined. Olga Leontievna and Pyotr Leontievich sat at the end of the long table in the dining room drinking tea in silence. The samovar sang in a tiny, comfortable voice—it felt quite at home there. The big dining-room windows were half covered with frost.

“There was another letter from Seryozha today,” said Olga Leontievna, “shall I read it?”

“Yes, please, Olenka.”

Olga Leontievna read in a low voice.

“I returned to Cairo yesterday. I saw that old woman they call the sphinx and climbed the pyramids.” (Pyotr Leontievich began tapping on the floor with his foot, Olga Leontievna looked up at him and he stopped tapping.) “A wonderful idea came into my head, auntie dear: I have decided to buy a mummy, cheap, at about fifteen rubles. I will cut out a piece somewhere on its back and hide it. Then I’ll pack it up and send it to Russia. In our forest—you remember that place where they say there was once a hermitage—I’ll bury my Pharaoh and sprinkle phosphorous over the top of him. Then I’ll spread the rumour that at the hermitage a grave has been seen to glow at night. The people will come in crowds. I’ll have to get some enterprising monks to go to that place and dig. They’ll unearth holy relics. If you please, I am willing to sell the site with the graves and the holy relics together with the road leading to it. They will buy it and will build a hotel. They will send a telegram to the Emperor. Then I will appear with my piece of the mummy: excuse me but this is my own Pharaoh, here is a piece from his back and a receipt from the shop where I bought him. I’ll get hundreds of thousands from the monks. There, you see, my dear aunt, the effect of an African sky—I am afraid I shall become a financial genius or shall marry a Negress. Simultaneously with this I am writing to Uncle Misha—my money is running short.”

"It's not at all nice," said Pyotr Leontievich, after a pause. "It's not nice and he's restless. He was always an atheist and now he's blasphemous. Write and tell him that he should not write to us about Pharaohs any more."

One evening at twilight a messenger, one of the Nalymov workers, came to Repievka with a strange letter for Olga Leontievna. "Come over, Mikhail Mikhailovich is very ill and wants to see you," was scribbled on it in sprawling letters.

The Nalymov worker said that his master was really very sick and that the girl Cleopatra had written the letter, the master had not been able to drive her away from the house by any means, then he had got used to her and now she was looking after him.

Olga Leontievna got ready quickly and set out for Nalymovo over the deep snow in a covered sledge across the dead plains lit up by a sad, icy moon surrounded by three bright haloes.

The sledge pulled up at Nalymov's porch at midnight. A faint light came from the dining-room window. The dogs bayed.

A tall, gaunt woman in a black shawl came to meet Olga Leontievna in the outer room; she bowed low like a village woman. The growling of the white borzoi bitch came through the open doors.

"What's wrong with him? Is he bad?" asked Olga Leontievna as she removed her three fur coats. "And who are you? Are you Cleopatra? Take me to him."

Cleopatra went ahead, opening the doors and holding them open. The bitch whined in the darkness.

"In here, please," whispered Cleopatra at the door of the dining room. "He's waiting for you."

Olga Leontievna saw Mishuka sitting under a hanging lamp beside a round table covered with a stained and crumpled cloth. He was terrible to look at, swollen beyond all semblance to a human being. His bald skull was all scratched, his cheeks,

yellow and swollen as if filled with butter, hid his eyes and his snorting nostrils were scarcely visible.

Pieces of wood had been screwed on to the armchair under his elbows and to support his head; arms with swollen hands hanging down his huge body drooped from these boards. He was breathing heavily with a rasping noise.

His green eyes buried in his flabby cheeks sought Olga Leontievna. In great fear she ran to him.

"Mishenka! What is the matter with you? What have you brought yourself to?"

"Cousin," said Mishuka with great difficulty, "I thank you." He began gasping for breath. "I have to sit all the time, I can't lie down. Dropsy."

"He's festering inside his chest," said Cleopatra. "And he eats without stopping, faster than we can serve him."

There were, indeed, plates of food standing on the dirty tablecloth. Mishuka's bristling moustache and his treble chin were smeared with grease. Looking round Olga Leontievna noticed a big jar of water on the table in which there was a white-bellied lizard with its legs outstretched.

"A crocodile" muttered Mishuka. "Seryozha sent it alive from Africa in thanks to me. It died today, that means that I too..."

Olga Leontievna clapped her hands in horror.

"Have you called a doctor?"

"The doctor came today," answered Cleopatra, standing by the sideboard with her lips pressed together. "The doctor said that he would die today or at the latest, tomorrow."

"T . . . t . . . t . . ." muttered Mishuka, with difficulty raising his drooping brows.

"What does he want to say?" asked Olga Leontievna. "Tomorrow? Oh, it's hard for him to die..."

"He's asking for the testament..."

Cleopatra took a folded sheet of paper from the drawer of the sideboard and came over to the lamp.

"This is why he sent for you, as a witness."

She began to read.

"All the ploughlands, meadows, forests and the uncultivated lands, the manor house, etc., I bequeath to Vera Repieva, née Khodansky, my niece three times removed, over the heads of nearer relations, in execution of which I have deposited bills to the value of a million and fifty thousand rubles at the Simbirsk court. I bequeath fifteen thousand in cash to the girl Maria Shitikova, nicknamed Cleopatra, for her loyalty to me and for the wrongs I did her. To closer relations, if such are to be found, I bequeath my blessing but in lands and money—*ficus*."

With her lips pressed sternly together Olga Leontievna listened to the reading of this strange will. When the reading was over and Mishuka, groaning and frowning made the sign of the *ficus*--bequeathed to his closest relatives--with three fingers of uncommon size, Olga Leontievna burst out in alarm:

"Thank you, Mishenka, for not having forgotten the orphan, but tell me, why do you do her this honour?"

"I wanted to dishonour her," said Mishuka. "Vera--that's why I made her that bequest."

"On account of her he drove us all out of the house like dogs," said Cleopatra.

Olga Leontievna, thrusting her glasses and her handkerchief into her bag, stepped up to Mishuka full of determination.

"How dare you! The evil sinner—he wants to use his lands to exculpate his sins. One foot in the grave, shows us a *ficus* and has mischief in mind. He'll remain himself and try to dishonour a woman on the other side of the grave.... Give me that will...."

She grabbed the paper from Cleopatra's hands, screwed it up and threw it in Mishuka's face.

"Farewel!!"

Mishuka, glaring like a helpless dog, breathed rapidly, rolled his eyes and groaned. Cleopatra crawled under his chair

after the crumpled will. Olga Leontievna had already reached the door at a jog trot but turned and gasped.

"Good Lord, but he's dying!"

His face a deep red, his eyes protruding, Mishuka tried to get up. The boards that held him in the chair creaked and broke, the pieces fell to the floor. Suddenly the dog under the table howled wildly. Cleopatra, stretching out her sinewy neck and thrusting her nose forward, looked piercingly at the dying man.

Mishuka opened his mouth and struck out his tongue as though he intended to swallow the girl in black.

"P ... p ... priest." The word seemed to be torn from his belly. He collapsed into the armchair, on to the creaking springs. His head dropped forward on to his chest. Blood streamed from his mouth.

Olga Leontievna made rapid, tiny signs of the cross.

"Lord, let thy servant depart in peace..."

Cleopatra went slowly to Mishuka and covered his face with a clean napkin.

1910-1922





THE LAME PRINCE

*"From off his throne on ice-bound crag,
Free exile from his native highlands,
The waterfall leaps like a stag,
To gorgy gloom and prison silence.
The cloud back to the mountain drawn,
By hand of love that never falters
Like lamb's blood spilling o'er the altar.
Spreads crimson on the gleaming snow."*

VYACHESLAV IVANOV. "Guiding Stars"

MOONLIGHT

I

BY MIDNIGHT the moon stood over Kolyvan, lit up the irregular windows on the left side of the log cabins, sent the black shadows stretching out to the right along the trampled sorrel of the village street and then disappeared behind a solitary cloud that had strayed into the night sky. This was the time when an open carriage drawn by three horses abreast, the harness bells muffled, came racing hell for leather through the village.

The cocks had not yet begun their matutinal crowing but the dogs had already ceased their yelping and the only light visible was that which shone through the cracks in the shutters of the last house in the village.

A long pole on top of which was a hoop with a bundle of hay tied to it, stuck up above the gambrel roof of the gate

telling the traveler from afar that this house was an inn. Beyond the inn the flat steppe, grey in the moonlight, stretched away into the distance; it was in this direction that the lathering horses were being driven, the regular gallop of the trace horses and fast trot of the shaft horse sounding dully in the silence of the night. The man in the carriage raised his cane and touched the coachman. The horses sat back on their haunches and pulled up in front of the inn.

The man unwound a traveling rug from his legs, climbed out by holding onto the coachman's box and limped across the grass to the low porch of the inn. There he turned back and spoke softly to the coachman.

"You may go. Be back at dawn."

The coachman flipped the reins, the carriage rolled away into the steppe and the man took hold of the door handle, rattled it and then leaned back against the rickety post of the porch as though wrapped in thought. His narrow face was pale, there were shadows under his long eyes and his small, wavy beard was worn to leave the chin bare. Slowly he drew off his right glove and knocked again.

The patter of bare feet across the creaking boards of the outer room came to him, the door opened a tiny crack, was then thrown wide open and a young peasant woman stood on the threshold.

"Alyoshenka!" she exclaimed in happy excitement. "And I didn't expect you" She touched his hand shyly and kissed his shoulder.

"Will you let me in, Sasha?" he asked. "I can stay till morning." Throwing back his head he walked into the moonlit outer room of the inn.

Sasha went in front of him and kept turning back with a smile on her fresh and pretty face that showed her white teeth.

"I saw you ride through the village at midday. 'He's probably going to master Volkov,' I thought. I thought they would

press you to spend the night there but here you are, come to see me. . . .”

“Have you any guests in the inn?”

“There’s nobody here,” answered Sasha, going into the summer living room. “Some peasants with haywains stopped here but they are all sleeping outside,” and she sat down on a wide bed covered with a patchwork quilt and smiled tenderly.

The moonlight, shining through the tiny window, lit up Sasha’s face, the slightly upturned corners of her lips and her long neck emphasized by the opening of her black sarafan; a string of amber beads trembled on her bosom.

“Bring some wine,” said the newcomer.

He stood in the shadow holding his hat and stick. Sasha jumped up obediently and went out. He lay down on the bed and put his hands behind his head. A slight frown gave a twist to his face and distorted it. He turned on his side, grabbed a pillow and buried his face in it.

Sasha returned carrying a small table covered with a napkin; she placed two bottles on it, one of wine and one of some sweet alcoholic decoction, then climbed up some steps to the larder and brought down a plate of nuts, raisins and cookies. She moved rapidly and lightly, going back and forth from moonlight to shadow. The man on the bed raised himself on to his elbow.

“Come over here, Sasha,” he said. She immediately sat down at his feet on the bed. “Tell me, Sasha, if I were to hurt you really badly, if I were to insult you mortally, would you forgive me?”

“As you will, Alexei Petrovich” answered Sasha in a tremulous voice, after a slight pause. “And for your love I thank you humbly.” She turned away from him and sighed.

For a long time Prince Alexei Petrovich Krasnopolsky tried to get a glimpse of the expression on Sasha’s face in the dark.

“Anyway, you wouldn’t understand,” he said softly, almost

lazily, after a long pause. "You're glad I've come and you didn't even ask where I'd come from and why I am lying here on your bed. My lying here on your bed now is disgusting. Yes, horrible, Sasha, rotten. . . ."

"What are you saying?" she muttered in terror. "As though I had let you come in and did not love you."

"Come closer. That's better," continued the prince and seized Sasha by her round shoulders. "I said that you wouldn't understand, so don't try to. Listen, this evening I had a long talk, as long as I wanted, with a certain person. And it made me feel good, very good."

"With Miss Volkova?"

"Yes, with her. I sat close to her and my head was dizzier than it ever gets from your wine. You know, sometimes you dream that somebody is stroking you tenderly, that's how I remember her, just as in a dream. I have just come away from there and was thinking that everything would go well with me. But when I drove into Kolyvan I realized that all I had to do was halt my carriage at your door and all my well-being would fly away to the devil. Now do you understand? No? I must not come to you any more. I wish you'd poison me."

Sasha's hands dropped helplessly to her sides, she lowered her head.

"Are you sorry for me, Sasha? Are you?" asked the prince; he drew her towards him, kissed her face but she did not open her eyes or part her tightly clamped lips; she was like a woman of stone.

"Stop it," he said. "I'm only joking."

At last she spoke in a tone of sheer desperation.

"I know you're joking, but I believe you all the same. Why do you torment me? There is not the smallest part of my soul left unbruised. I know you only love me out of pity. I'm just a peasant woman, what can I expect from life, how can I hope for happiness!"

At this moment a cock crowed loudly outside. A sleepy horse pawed the boards of its stall. In the faint morning light the prince's gaunt but handsome face gradually became visible. His big eyes were sad and serious, a slightly sarcastic smile had frozen on his lips.

Sasha looked at him for a long time, then began to kiss his hands, shoulders and face; she lay down beside him, warming him with her strong and amorous body.

II

In a new log cabin that stood on the other end of the village in the middle of a small weed-ridden yard surrounded by a wattle fence. Doctor Zabolkin lay on the bed-shelf of the stove.

All that was-visible from below was a head and a chin covered with stiff red bristles supported between two fists. Tufts of the same red hair stuck out in all directions, starting from the crown of the head and falling over the forehead and obscuring the eyes; the face was unwashed and puffed from sleep.

Doctor Grigory Ivanovich Zabolkin, screwing up his eyes, spat down from his shelf, aiming at a knot in a floor board.

Opposite him, on a bench under the tin lamp on the wall, sat a priest, a man of small stature, calm and humble in appearance, with a tinge of grey in his dark locks. The sleeves of his cassock were greasy and in concertina folds. With a wry face Father Vasily sat in silence, his hands in his sleeves, watching the doctor and his spitting.

"How low a man can fall in three years," said Father Vasily at last.

"And don't you like it?" responded Grigory Ivanovich lazily. "It's been a habit of mine from childhood: whenever I'm absolutely fed up I clamber into some awkward place and spit. If you don't like it, don't look. I even used to have a

favourite place for it—under the barn where the grass grew soft. Our bitch always used to have her pups there. The pups were warm and smelt of milk, the bitch licked them and they whined softly. It's good to be a dog, honest it is."

"You're a fool, Grigory Ivanovich," said Father Vasily after a longish pause. "I'd better go."

"You have no right to go until you provide me with spiritual comfort, Father Vasily. That's what the government pays you money for."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"You have graduated the university, you are still young, you have a lay profession. Why, in your place I'd be laughing all day long. But you, no! What are you fit for with your ideas? You lie on your bed and spit."

"Once, Father Vasily, I had wonderful ideas."

Grigory Ivanovich turned over on his back, stretched his arms out from the shelf, snapped his fingers and yawned. "It's true I can't get used to vodka."

"Ugh!" said Father Vasily; with great care he took a tin cigarette case from the pocket of his cassock, struck a match, holding it between his cupped palms from force of habit, like one who usually lights matches in the wind, lit his cigarette, rolled the matchstick between his fingers and then threw it under the bench. "Believe me, if there were other educated people in the village I would never come here."

There had been many conversations of this sort between the doctor and Father Vasily since spring, when the Kolyvan hospital burnt down. Grigory Ivanovich had then handed over all the work to his assistant and had retired to the little cottage that the Zemstvo had rented until a new hospital was built.

Three years before Grigory Ivanovich had received his first appointment at Kolyvan. He had begun eagerly driving round the villages, giving medical treatment and even helping

his patients with money. Dragging through the mud of the flooded dirt roads or with the icy wind cutting right through him on a January night when a dead moon hung over the dead snow; looking into tiny stuffy hovels full of screaming, scabby kids; gassed and driven to distraction by the acrid smoke in black bathhouses where women screamed in childbirth; sending despairing letters to the Zemstvo for more medicines, more doctors and more money; realizing that no matter what he did it all disappeared into the bottomless abyss of village poverty, ruin and mismanagement—Grigory Ivanovich felt at last that he was alone with a jar of castor oil on a territory 60 versts across, where the children died by hundreds from scarlet fever and the adults from hunger-bred typhus and that in any case the castor oil would not help and was not what was wanted. Then the hospital burnt down and he poured the castor oil on the ground and climbed up on to his bed-shelf.

Father Vasily, before whose eyes the third doctor had been crushed in this way, was very sorry for Zabotkin and went to him almost every day and tried in some way or another, with a cigarette or a funny story—not to comfort him, how can you comfort a man when there's nothing left of him but ashes—but at least to make him laugh for a little while: at least he would laugh a little.

Grigory Ivanovich stopped his yawning, turned back on to his stomach, lowered his arms over the side of the stove and asked for a smoke.

"I bought tobacco from Kurbenev today," said Father Vasily in answer to this; standing under the bed-shelf on tiptoes he lifted up the cigarette case, at the same time pressing a secret spring.

Although Grigory Ivanovich knew that the cigarette case was a trick one, a practical joke, he pretended not to remember it and fumbled in the false bottom where there were no cigarettes. . . .

"That's a 'Freeman's' for you," laughed Father Vasily, well pleased with the joke. "Here you are, take a smoke. You know, I was at Volkov's today."

"They say he's a beast, a real brute, that Volkov of yours."

"It's absolutely untrue! It doesn't matter about silly things people say. He's a splendid fellow and he lives. . . . You ought to take a good look at such people, Grigory Ivanovich, and then you wouldn't lie about on a stove. And his daughter, Yekaterina Alexandrovna, believe me she's a real beauty, a noble creation of the Lord. . . . If I were a painter, I would paint her as Mary Magdalene smiling at her bridegroom."

"What do you mean—smiling at her bridegroom?" Grigory Ivanovich interrupted him.

"Haven't you heard about it? The great painters have always incorporated that smile in their best creations. A maid, a virgin, the vessel of love and life, always smiles wonderfully as though she can see an angel beside her pointing his finger at her womb. I am not joking. Don't you laugh at it." Father Vasily raised his brows and puffed at his cigarette, blowing the smoke down his nostrils, and then said, "Yes, and that's that," sighed, did not speak again but went out.

Grigory Ivanovich, however, was not laughing. He lay quietly on his shelf with his eyes closed and his teeth clenched because, after all, he was only twenty-eight and casual words about virginal smiles could still strike him like thunder.

III

The moonlight was bright in the dark blue sky and it seemed that there was no end to it—it found its way through cracks, through closed eyelids, into bedrooms and box rooms, into the lairs of wild beasts, down to the bottom of the pond whence the spellbound fish came swimming up and touched the surface of the water with their round, open mouths.

That same night the moon hung over the betrampled bank of the pond—it spread like a wing of light out of the dense growth of the Volkov garden.

A broad-shouldered, bearded groom lay resting on his elbow on a sheepskin coat spread on the grass by the water. A stableboy was dreaming in the saddle nearby; his grey horse, half asleep, nodded its head and rattled its bit. The horses were grazing on the low meadow amidst the tall burdock and wormwood. The young colts lay on their sides muzzling their long legs.

An old man dressed in a caftan was walking slowly along the bank, coming from the direction of the high willows on the dam. He reached the groom, stopped and stood for a long time, either looking at something or listening....

"It's indeed warm tonight," said the old man.

"What do you keep wandering about like this for, Kondraty Ivanovich," asked the groom lazily, "are you worried about something?..."

"I can't sleep so I came out for a stroll."

"Thinking a lot?"

"Well, I do think. ... I've been milling around these places all my life as though I were in a wheel—all about the house and around it. I've worn the earth down to the very stones. ... And so I return on my old footsteps. They seem to attract me. Maybe it's time to die, eh?"

"It's time you had a rest, Kondraty Ivanovich, time you went on pension."

"The master's been kicking up a fuss again," said Kondraty in a low voice. "The prince came again at dusk. He left his carriage beyond the pond, took a boat and crept up to the summerhouse like a thief and there he had a talk with the young lady. ... He sticks like a leech and he's dangerous, I tell you straight. ..."

"He's a prince, isn't he, Kondraty Ivanovich? You and I work for wages, we've sold ourselves, we hold our tongues

while he does as he pleases. They say he fires cannon when he sees his guests off."

"There's nothing bad about that, but why does he keep coming and doesn't propose. Our young lady's not looking herself..."

Kondraty Ivanovich stopped. The groom, sitting up on his coat, looked round him and shouted at the boy:

"Mishka, don't sleep, the horses have gone."

The stableboy awoke in his saddle, jerked back his head, clicked his tongue and cracked his whip; the grey walked a few steps and stood still again, lowering her neck. Again she and the stableboy dozed off—the night was so warm and calm.

Kondraty stood still for a while, then said very significantly, "Hmnn. that's how it is," and wandered back into the garden.

The old blasted willow, the wattle fence, the ditch with a narrow bridge over it, the paths, the outlines of the trees, all this was familiar to him and all of them, like keys, opened up old memories, the pleasant and the unpleasant, although when he remembered really well there had been little of the pleasant.

Kondraty had been valet to Vadim Andreyevich and to Andrei Vadimych and even remembered Vadim Vadimych Volkov himself although he was really afraid of remembering him even in his dreams—he had been bewhiskered and terrible and could not control his rages; for the humiliation of the smaller landed gentry he kept a particularly daring jester, Resheto, and a crazy woman. These were Kondraty's parents and from his birth he inherited fear of all the Volkovs and loyalty to them.

Vadim Andreyevich, the father of the present Alexander Vadimych, had been a great lover of reading and writing and had even published a pamphlet for peasants with the title *The Virtuous Toiler*, but he had been firmly opposed to the abolition of serfdom and one day he ordered one-eyed Fedka

the herdsman to be brought to his room, sat him on a silk-covered settee, offered him a cigar and said: "Fyodor Ivanovich, you are now an independent and free individual, I congratulate you, you may go wherever you wish, but if you want to work for me then be kind enough to say so and we'll have you flogged in the stables for the last time." Fedka thought it over and said "All right."

Under Vadim Andreyevich's father, Andrei Vadimych, Kondraty had begun service as a houseboy. The master had been fat and dull, he liked his steambath and used to get drunk there sitting naked amongst his guests and his wenches. His house servants burned him in that bathhouse.

The present Alexander Vadimych Volkov was not that sort—of smaller calibre. He had grown up when times were harder for the aristocracy and it was impossible to let oneself go to the full.

It was not that Kondraty did not fear Alexander Vadimych or did not respect him enough—but he was attached body and soul to his daughter Katyusha, the prettiest woman in the district.

Kondraty crossed the dam and walked down into the gully, climbed over the wattles and walked slowly along the damp and dark avenue.

It was quiet in the garden; occasionally a bird would stir in the linden branches and settle down to sleep again, the tree frogs moaned tenderly and sadly, the fish splashed in the pond.

The oval pond was surrounded by a ring of ancient willows so thick and drooping that the moonlight could not penetrate their foliage; the moon played on the centre of the pond where either a duck or a young rook was floating on the glassy ripples, its outstretched wings scarcely supporting it as it lay on the water.

When he reached the end of the avenue, Kondraty looked to the left where the summerhouse, grown lopsided from age, stood in the deep shadows beside the pond.

Peering closely he distinguished the figure of a woman in a white shawl leaning on the railing. A dry branch cracked under Kondraty's feet and the woman turned quickly and spoke in an agitated voice.

"Is that you? Have you come back?"

"It's I, Katyenka," said Kondraty, coughing; he walked towards the bridge.

Yekaterina Alexandrovna, wrapped in a shawl up to her chin, tripped lightly over the boards to the bank and stood still in front of Kondraty.

"Can't you sleep either?" she said. "There are so many mosquitoes in my room that I couldn't sleep. Take me home."

"Mosquitoes there may be," said Kondraty sternly, "but it's not nice for a young lady to be out on the pond at night alone. . . ."

Katyenka, who was walking in front, stopped short.

"What sort of a tone is that, Kondraty!"

"Just a tone. Alexander Vadimych rated me, rated me soundly today and with good cause: it isn't at all reasonable to go walking about at night, you know that yourself. . . ."

Katyenka turned away, sighed and walked on, brushing the wet grass with the hem of her skirt.

"Don't you tell papa anything about tonight, sweetheart," she whispered suddenly and her lips touched Kondraty's wrinkled cheek.

He took the young lady as far as the balcony from which six columns, the plaster peeling in places, rose up, the upper parts bluish in the moonlight; he waited until Yekaterina Alexandrovna had gone into the house, coughed, and went round the corner to a small porch that led to his little room with a window facing the bushes.

He had no sooner sat down on a trunk covered with a piece of felt than Alexander Vadimych's angry voice resounded through the house.

"Kondraty!"

From force of habit Kondraty made the sign of the cross over his heart and trotted down the long passage to the door behind which the master was shouting.

As he took hold of the door handle Kondraty could smell smoke. When he went in he saw Alexander Vadimych through clouds of thick smoke in which the candles flickered with a yellow light; the master was wearing nothing but a shirt open at his fat, hairy chest and his face was purple; he was bending over an earthenware brazier from which came clouds of smoke from burning peat. Raising his dazed and bulging eyes to Kondraty, Volkov spoke in a hoarse voice.

"The mosquitoes have eaten me up. Get me some kvass." And when Kondraty turned towards the door he shouted: "I'll give it to you, you scoundrel! Why don't you close the windows at night?"

"I beg your pardon," answered Kondraty and ran to the cellar for kvass.

AN UNEXPECTED EMOTION

I

Grigory Ivanovich Zabolkin stared for a long time at the rags, rubbish, cigarette butts and dust on the bed-shelf. drew in a deep breath of the heavy air through his nostrils, touched his aching head, lifted himself up slowly as though his body were a heavy boneless mass, frowned and climbed down from the stove, feeling for the footholds with his feet.

When he reached the floor Grigory Ivanovich pulled up his trousers and bent over the fragment of mirror that stood under the lamp. A greasy yellow face looked at him with dull blue eyes and tufts of hair sticking out in all directions.

"What an awful mess!" said Grigory Ivanovich; he ran his fingers through his hair, threw the hair back from his eyes, then sat down at the table and rested his elbows on it.

There are fragments of thoughts that remain in the mind, ideas that have been saved up, as thick as marsh slime and sickly as rot; if a man is able to pull them out from the depths of his soul, is able to withstand the impact of them and get rid of them then everything within him will be cleansed; should he, however, merely turn them over, touch them gently like a sore tooth, breathe the same rot over and over again, feel the sweet pain of loathing for himself—such a man is not worthy of a second thought, for that which is dearest to him is filth, he enjoys someone spitting in his face.

Grigory Ivanovich was very loath to part with the old thoughts buried within him—and in the course of three years he had piled up a considerable number. Apart from that it is often dangerous for a man whose spirit has still not fully matured to see none but the sick, unfortunate and tormented. In the preceding three years Grigory Ivanovich had seen an inordinate number of peasant women tortured by childbirth and mistreatment, peasant men blackened by the excessive use of vodka and scabby children grovelling in dirt, hunger and syphilis. It seemed to Grigory Ivanovich that all Russia was the same—tortured, dark and scabby. If this were so and there was no way out of it, then let everything go to the devil. And if everything was filth and stench it was because it had to be and there was no sense in pretending to be a man when you were really a pig.

“And that’s how it is, all signed and sealed,” he thought, waving his gaunt hand in front of his face. “I shall not take my life, of course, but neither will I lift a finger to improve it. Flaunted the Volkov maiden in front of me as a comfort. Listen, Father Vasily, I’d like to take your Volkov girl around where there is typhus then we’d see how she would ‘smile at the bridegroom’....”

Grigory Ivanovich laughed venomously, then began to think that perhaps he was not quite right....

“Let’s say that the young lady has never seen anything and

doesn't know anything—a hothouse fruit. . . . That's something by way of justification. . . . But the priest makes me mad. . . . Where is all this goodness of yours, show it to me? Man is born in filth, lives like a swine and dies with a curse on his lips. . . . And there is not a gleam of light in all this impassable morass. If I am an honest man I ought to spit honestly and frankly at this vileness called life. And first and foremost into my own mug. . . .”

Grigory Ivanovich actually did spit in the middle of the floor, then turned to the window and saw that the day was dawning.

Somehow he had not expected it and it surprised him. He got up from the table and went out into the yard, breathed in the sharp odour of grass and dampness and frowned as though the odour had destroyed some of his ideas. Then he walked slowly along the fence towards the water meadows that bordered the stream.

The wattle fence that extended along two sides of the cottage and its yard ran down to the stream where the willows grew; one of them had had the crown lopped off and the top was sprouting a large number of branches, the other bent low over the narrow stream.

The sky was still dark but in the east, on the edge of the earth, a delicate light was spreading; against this light the peaks of the thatched roofs and the trees stood out clearly and more distinctly.

The village cocks crowed. The cock in Grigory Ivanovich's yard answered. A sharp breeze carrying the acrid smell of the grass blew through the willow and its leaves, rocking like little boats, rustled gently.

“This is all deception, there is nothing of importance in it,” muttered Grigory Ivanovich as he stood by the tree watching intently how the pale gold of the east that was driving away the night sky became grey, then green like the water, and then blue and how a huge star still flamed, hanging low over

the earth. This was all so unusual that Grigory Ivanovich opened his mouth and stared.

The star melted into the flaming eastern sky and suddenly disappeared as the sun rose in a fiery ball over the steppes.

Steam curled over the river. The wind sent bluish shadows chasing over the greyish grass. The rooks in the branches across the river screamed, and everywhere, in the bushes and in the grass, birds began to sing and chirrup.... The sun rose over the steppes....

Grigory Ivanovich, however, was stubborn: he smiled contemptuously, screwed up his eyes in the sun and wandered back into the stench of his log cabin.

When he went in, the lamp on the wall was still burning with a yellow flame, the place still smelled of stale tobacco smoke, everything was just right for a headache.

"What a hell of a fug," muttered Grigory Ivanovich and immediately turned back into the yard; he rubbed his forehead and thought: "I'll go and bathe. Ugh, something strange is happening to me."

II

The icy water made Grigory Ivanovich shiver and after plunging in twice with a splutter he dressed himself quickly, thrust his hands into his sleeves, sat down on the trunk of a willow that grew out horizontally and looked at the east.

The blue beads of the river disappeared into the reeds to appear again meandering across the green meadow and through the distant birch grove, into the open spaces beyond.

Amongst the sorrel on the opposite bank there were geese that looked like lumps of snow. In the water, hazy under the steam, the gudgeons swam about disturbing the waterweeds. On the bed of the river right below his feet lay a piece of old tree wood that looked just like a bewhiskered sheatfish which the

boys were so afraid of because it clutched at their feet. Little grey birds flew about whistling amongst the reeds.

Grigory Ivanovich, his teeth chattering, watched this scene of so much activity while the sun began to warm up his face and bare feet.

"Of course, it's all very pleasant," he thought, "but it will all be over very soon, it's all pure accident." He lowered his head and, for some reason or other, that night seemed to have been an evil dream—the time spent on the bed-shelf amidst the filth, the foul air and the headache.

The geese suddenly startled him: gobbling loudly they ran down the river led by an old gander. Spreading their white wings they leaped into the water and swam along turning their heads haughtily left and right....

Grigory Ivanovich stifled a sigh (it was as though his soul wanted to cry out but must not) and began to watch the haze rising from the river into the heavens.

The river was a long one, there were many bends and creeks in it and everywhere that faint haze was curling upwards and gathering into white clouds beyond the forest.

With the morning sun, the first white cloud floated up behind the birchwoods, others following in its wake. The little clouds massed in billows over the woods as though forming a nest. Before you could glance round the whole sky was filled with white clouds, all floating in the same direction, slowly, like swans, aware of the brevity of their existence. Cool shadows cast by the clouds glided across the steppes. The clouds changed their shapes, turned into animals, spread out into glades, formed other figures and so would continue playing until the wind would gather them all into a big heavy mass, and the lightning pierced them and they bore fruit, pouring forth their waters onto the earth and themselves dwindling to nothing.

"I'm just a cur," muttered Grigory Ivanovich, "stubborn and idle. But still it is wonderful...."

Unable to restrain himself any longer he was so overjoyed

that his hands began to tremble and his eyes blinked rapidly; he walked over to the fence, climbed on to it and looked round him to see whether there was not some unusual, kindly person to whom he could tell everything he felt at that moment.

Just then some boys came along the street that followed the side fence; they shuffled their feet, raising clouds of soft dust, they kicked and turned somersaults.

Following the boys came young girls, hand in hand, dressed in bright sarafans and kerchiefs. They were singing a song, a fine melody and although it was not a new one he did not know it.

The young men of the village brought up the rear. One of them, a tall and thin youngster in a torn homespun coat was playing on a reed pipe, his upper lip swelling out like a balloon; another, stockily built and handy, wearing a waistcoat and a peaked cap, was pulling at an accordion.

The lads and lasses turned round by the corner house and the fence. The song and the music could still be heard even when they were some distance away. Then they came into sight a second time as they crossed a distant bridge and then disappeared behind a mound, behind the charred remains of the hospital.

"Amazing," muttered Grigory Ivanovich. "Or is it some special kind of day today?"

A sober-looking peasant dressed in bright new clothes, hatless, his hair plastered with grease, came up to the fence; he took hold of a stake, pushed between the wattles a jackboot that had been smeared with tar and on which the dust and chaff had already had time to settle, and asked:

"Out for a walk?"

"Good morning, Nikita. Where has that crowd gone?" asked Grigory Ivanovich. "Is it a holiday today?"

"Whitsunday today, Whitsunday," answered the peasant, quietly. "Grigory Ivanovich, you're beginning to get the days mixed up. The girls have gone to make garlands."

Nikita tried the stake of the wattle fence to see whether it was firmly stuck in the ground or not and suddenly, slightly opening a mouth surrounded by a curly blonde beard, looked Grigory Ivanovich straight in the eyes.

From the understanding gaze of the peasant's light eyes, colourless from exposure to the sun, from his tanned face, from his strong, fine-smelling body, Grigory Ivanovich realized that Nikita had come to see what he was doing in his leisure hour—what sort of fellow this gentleman was, what was wrong with him—and immediately, looking at him as he would at, say, a wheel, realized that Doctor Zabotkin was of no use to him, Nikita, because, although he was a doctor and read books, he did not know what to make of himself and was of no use to anybody.

Grigory Ivanovich realized all this and laughed.

"I have a little request to make," said Nikita. "Come with me to Grandma, she's been dying for a long time but the horses have all been busy and I haven't been able to get away from work myself.... I can run back right now and harness up."

"That's good," exclaimed Grigory Ivanovich. "Run away and harness your horse."

And Nikita did quickly harness his horse to a new cart which he drove up to the doctor's porch filled with fresh hay.

Grigory Ivanovich climbed contentedly into the cart, bunched up a bundle of hay for himself, sat down and crossed his legs under him.

"D'you know, Nikita, it really is a holiday today. I suppose you're married? D'you love your wife?"

Nikita raised his brows, clicked his tongue to the horse •and they drove off. His boots leaped and jumped against the wheel from the jolting of the cart. Grigory Ivanovich smiled broadly as he bounced up and down on the damp hay looking round him. It was good!

When the cart rattled over the zemstvo bridge frogs jumped from the rails into the sedge grass and ducks ran out from under the bridge to catch them. . . .

"A lot of frogs," said Nikita and winked.

There were open pasturelands and meadows across the river and beyond them stood the birch forest. Nikita turned round and made small talk with the doctor and as Grigory Ivanovich was silent most of the time and did not ask any silly questions Nikita began telling him about his farm, about what he had been thinking over during the winter, and then said quite suddenly, screwing up his shrewd grey eyes:

"The peasant's life has become a hard one: everything is reckoned in money nowadays. And if you turn the peasant into money, what is he worth—not more than a penny. He works hard, and it seems hardly worth it. You begin to think. . . ."

Nikita frowned and then shook his head without waiting for an answer, smiled again and pointed with his whip towards the fringe of the forest.

The girls were moving about between the birches weaving garlands from the branches. The small boys had climbed up the trees. The young men were lying in the grass listening to the strains of the accordion.

"They'll all be drunk by evening," said Nikita, "and there'll be such goings on. It used to be better."

The cart came out of the forest on to a narrow boundary road between fields of corn waving in the warm wind, fields that smelled of earth and honey. The clouds, now white and curly like fleece, could be seen all over the blue sky. The road dropped into a gully, then ran along the steep slope of a hill; on the horizon lay huge new piles of white clouds. What was there to wonder at in them? Somehow Grigory Ivanovich had not noticed it before, it was only now that he realized how beautiful they were.

"Look, Nikita, what wonderful clouds!" he exclaimed.

"Clouds, yes," answered Nikita, looking at them. "But they're empty, they're going for water and when they come back full of water they'll be darker. There was one cloud flew past the other day full of frogs. . . . We had a lot of fun."

He jumped down on to the ground and walked along beside the horse flicking the reins—the cart crawled up a sandy slope.

From the top of the embankment there opened up before Grigory Ivanovich's eyes an extensive plain divided into light and dark green and yellow squares of corn with two silver wings formed by a pond, with a fringe of willows forming a wreath around it. On the far side there was a village. Beyond the pond lay a garden with the red roof of a house showing through the curly tops of the trees.

"Volkov's place," said Nikita, pointing with his huge whip handle.

And Grigory Ivanovich felt that a lovable joy like a soft breeze had touched his heart. He wanted to fly to that wide red roof and if only for a minute see how wonderfully Volkov's daughter smiled.

III

Nikita's sick grandmother lived on the far side of the Volga. The horse scarcely managed to drag the cart through the sand of the riverbank between the willow bushes, many of which were broken and smeared with tar. At last the discoloured roof of the floating wharf with its flag bearing the letters P.O.S., came in sight.

There was no wind. The wavelets left in the wake of a passing steamer traveled slowly towards the sandy bank, rocking two boats full of water that were moored to a landing stage. Grigory Ivanovich walked along the rocking boardwalk to the wharf, sat down and gazed at the distant bank, steep and green, where a big white house stood in an open space between the trees: it was a house with a dome and columns, with windows

always boarded up—the Miloye Manor House of the late Princess Krasnopolskaya. In the course of his frequent travels Grigory Ivanovich had become accustomed to that house and did not notice that the windows had been opened and that between the columns people were moving—they looked no bigger than flies from the distance.

Suddenly a little white cloud arose in front of the house, the sound of a cannon shot rolled across the river and a little later a heavily-laden boat put off from the shore.

"Like firing at the Turks," said Nikita, standing by the railing. "The prince is seeing his guests off."

"Yes, yes," answered Grigory Ivanovich, "and I didn't even notice that there were people living in the house. How long has it been open?..."

"Since spring, Grigory Ivanovich, when the owner appeared, the lame prince. And the goings-on here at first! People thought they would burn the house down. They say the prince wants to marry, you see, and he's coaxing brides with gunfire."

The boat came out diagonally across the river. Four sailors, hatless and in blue shirts, were at the oars. A red sunshade, swaying over the boat, was reflected in the water.

Soon the watchers were able to distinguish the shaven heads of the sailors and the faces of a girl and a fat man in a loose jacket and a white cap with a wide peak. He sat with his chin resting on a walking stick, his long ginger moustaches hanging down the stick.

The girl sitting beside him was all in white. Her straw hat was lying on her lap. Two auburn plaits were wound round her head and the sun, shining through the parasol, cast a rosy light on her oval, proud and beautiful face with its tiny, childish mouth.

"A serious gentleman," said Nikita. "Lives in the old way, sticks to his land but wants to marry his daughter to the prince—that's the Volkovs...."

"So that's what she's like," thought Grigory Ivanovich and, suddenly feeling shy, he left the railing, walked along the deck

of the floating wharf, reached the stern and hid behind sacks of flour; he blushed terribly and grunted: "what nonsense, like a baby. . ." And with his finger he began poking at a hole in a sack.

The sound of the oars reached him. The boat, carried by the current, drew nearer. Somebody in the boat shouted "Catch hold!", a sailor on the wharf shouted "Let her go!" and ran after the line that had dropped on the roof; the boat lurched heavily against the wharf and a second later Grigory Ivanovich heard a voice like music: "Papa, give me a hand," followed by a cry and a splash.

A shiver of fear ran over Grigory Ivanovich, he seized hold of the sack and then ran to the rail. . . .

Yekaterina Alexandrovna stood below the gangway holding up the sides of her wet skirt and laughing.

"You're not a goat, after all," Volkov said to her angrily. "You mustn't jump like that. . . ."

Both of them, father and daughter, walked up the gangway, made their way to the bank unhurriedly and got into a carriage drawn by a team of three black horses.

Yekaterina Alexandrovna turned her head and glanced at the house on the other side as though she were caressing it with her big grey eyes, slightly prominent like her father's. Volkov told the coachman to go and the horses in fancy harness pulled at top speed the lacquered carriage away from the willow bushes.

Grigory Ivanovich stood still for a long time watching the disappearing carriage, returned to the bench, noticed the wet track of a woman's shoe under his jackboot and carefully shifted his foot.

The steamer soon arrived. Grigory Ivanovich sailed downstream to Nikita's grandmother and came home late at night, exhausted and untalkative.

He did not go into the house but lay down to sleep on a trunk in the porch. He fell asleep immediately but not for long.

The crowing of a cock awakened him and he looked at the rectangle of the open door through which he could see the stars, then turned on his side, shifted over on to his belly, screwed up his eyes and began to sigh.

VENOMOUS RECOLLECTIONS

I

Prince Alexei Petrovich woke up in a deep armchair before a dressing table beside a high window with the curtains open. The curtains of the other two windows in the bedroom were drawn and the pendulum of the clock on the mantelpiece ticked away steadily in the darkness.

Through the windows the upper parts of the garden were visible; farther away was the lilac ribbon of the river, the floating wharf beyond it and then the patch of willow bushes, the water meadows with their reddish lakes—their oval surface reflected the sad sunset and grey clouds; a narrow road ran through fields and hills to the horizon, scarcely visible.

The edges of the clouds turned red from the setting, dying sun and the clouds that floated higher were rose-coloured in a sky of sea blue; still higher a star had just appeared.

Alexei Petrovich stared at it all, touching his gaunt pale cheek with his cold fingers.

In the hollows of his eyes lay heavy blue shadows and the fine hair of his chestnut beard curled over his rounded cheekbones.

Only these—the white hand, cheek and prominent eyes—could be seen reflected in the mirror of the dressing table; Alexei Petrovich, occasionally glancing at his reflection, did not move.

He knew that if he moved all the distastefulness of the previous night would rush to his head and spoil the calm contem-

plation of all the things that were as clear as crystal. His thoughts were also sorrowful and transparent.

Such is the sorrowful mien of the sunset over Russian rivers. And sadder still was the road that fled away into the sunset: God knows whither it went or whence it came—it approached the river as though it wanted to drink and then run away again; there was something moving along it—was it a cart?.. You couldn't tell, and what did it matter, anyway?

This sorrow of the heavens and of the earth brought rest to Alexei Petrovich. It seemed that the past did not affect him and that which was to come would pass just as uselessly and phantomlike as ever and he, after noisy carousing with his friends, after disturbing evening meetings with Yekaterina Alexandrovna in the garden, when he wanted to touch at least her dress with his lips and did not dare, after Sasha's tender caresses, after joys and remorse and after, last of all, memories of St. Petersburg that stung like frostbite—he would rub off the grease paint like a tired actor and would for ever and ever gaze at that road and at a sunset that chilled the heart.

But scarcely had Alexei Petrovich thought of this tranquillity before contradictory ideas began to disturb him surreptitiously. . . .

"But you are cold and lonely like a corpse," one thought whispered to him. "You have merely destroyed yourself and others and nobody is concerned about you sitting so small in that armchair. . . . And you, perhaps the most miserable of all men, are in dire need of tenderness and sympathy. . . ."

"Nobody gives caresses and sympathy for nothing," answered a second thought.

A third said bitterly: "None of them did anything but take from you, make demands of you and leave you spiritually ruined."

"But then you didn't love anybody," said the first one again, "and now you are rejected and your heart has withered."

"No, I did love, I want to love and I can love," whispered Alexei Petrovich, turning round in his chair.

The tranquility had been disturbed. Outside the sunset lost its colour and faded away and its place was taken by the night that poured in from the sides.

"My God, what awful boredom," said Alexei Petrovich and pressed his hands so tight to his eyes that they hurt him. He knew that the time had come for him to move restlessly in his chair, to bear the torment of shame and to think of St. Petersburg. . . .

He could not get away from those memories, they were always at hand and could only be drowned in wine or debauchery.

II

Alexei Petrovich had served in a Guards Regiment in which he enlisted eight years before, the year his mother and father died.

He made his way steadily through his small fortune, confident that when the last hundred-ruble note had been changed, one of his relatives would die and that, in general, something would happen.

Thanks to this confidence it would have been difficult to find a more carefree man than Prince Krasnopolsky in all St. Petersburg. The ladies liked him very much indeed. His attachments had always been short-lived and flighty and never left any traces in him except tender and amusing memories.

He served six years in the regiment. The days had passed in hilarity and excitement all those years. And then, one day, Alexei Petrovich looked back and it seemed to him that all these years he had been walking down a monotonous corridor and that ahead of him lay the same sort of dull, grey corridor. This new sensation of life astounded and saddened him.

Just about this time, in a tiresome and little-known house,

in the drawing room of Princess Matskaya, he had met a woman who suddenly, like a storm, awakened the dormant passions within him.

Alexei Petrovich stood beside an anaemic young diplomat listening to idiotic expromptus and witticisms long known to the whole world, and had already decided to withdraw discreetly when the footman threw open the gilded doors. A very tall lady, her silk dress rustling, a silvery fur thrown over her shoulders, entered the room and sat down swiftly on the sofa.

Her movements were impetuous but hampered by her attire. Under her hat, hair the colour of copper rose up from a low forehead. Her face was lustreless with beautiful, half-closed eyes and a narrow nose—it was a troubled, unhappy face.

“Who is she?” asked Alexei Petrovich quickly.

“Mordvinskaya, Anna Semyonovna. She is talked about,” answered the diplomat, spilling the coffee from his cup on to the carpet.

That was their first meeting. Alexei Petrovich remembered every tiny detail of it.

When they were introduced, Anna Semyonovna narrowed her eyes and merely glanced at him as though she were weighing him up.

Alexei Petrovich, rattling his spurs and holding his hat on his hip, was trying to find the right words, they always came easily and ordinarily but now they seemed quite senseless.

Anna Semyonovna listened to him, sitting bolt upright, her pink ear slightly cocked. A white handkerchief that lay on her black skirt emitted some peculiar odour, something feminine or perhaps the perfume came from her herself. Then she smiled just as though the audience was over. Alexei Petrovich did not immediately realize that he had to go away and she rose, rustling her silks and thrusting out her chest; she nodded to an acquaintance and walked away to the other drawing room. unattainable and unusual.

After this meeting Alexei Petrovich lived for several days in the wonderful world of perfumes. Nothing existed for him that was not like the perfume of the handkerchief that had been dropped on Anna Semyonovna's lap and at even the faintest suggestion of that perfume Alexei Petrovich's eyes grew dark and he felt a clutching at his heart.

Sitting in his three-room bachelor flat on the ground floor of a house on Fontanka, near the Summer Garden, Alexei Petrovich would stare distraught at walls that had bullet holes in them from times when he held stag parties there; he would sit down at the table on which a number of women's photographs were standing, lie on the leather couch, whistle a Chopin tune—everywhere he could see the pale profile with its tender mouth and eyes that seemed to be filmed over by some great warmth. . . . Even his batman, who usually sang soldiers' songs in a womanish voice in the kitchen, did not bother him any more.

When large snowflakes began to fall outside Alexei Petrovich pressed his forehead to the windowpane, gazed at the soft quivering blanket that was falling from heaven and then shouted suddenly to his batman:

"My greatcoat and cap, quickly!"

Such is the snow when it spreads over heaven and earth and houses, when women bury themselves in their winter coats, warming their shoulders and bosoms in the sweet-smelling furs, when a horse comes flying out of the blizzard with its tail outstretched in the wind and disappears again so swiftly that you scarcely have time to see who is sitting in the low sleigh—then is the time to stand on watch at the corner to see who will come flying past, dark eyes in a rosy face flashing out from under a hood. This is the time to mount a fast horse, bury your face in your collar and set out wondering whom you will meet that evening, to whom you will lose your heart.

Alexei Petrovich walked swiftly along the embankment, his fur-lined greatcoat flying open. The snow melted on his

cheeks and the merry rattle of his spurs egged him on. He stopped at the Hermitage Bridge and there realized that he was on his way to Princess Matskaya's house.

He shrugged his shoulders, smiled and looked round.

The thick snow dimmed the light of the street lamps, it lay on cornices and statues, piled up cushions on the dark granite. There were no people abroad on foot: the windows of the palace were dark; the sentry at the entrance stood motionless, closely wrapped in his long sheepskin coat with his rifle pressed tight to his side.

Suddenly he heard a shout and a black horse, covered in lather and snow came flying on to the Hermitage Bridge throwing its legs out in great strides. Seated in the narrow sleigh behind the driver's broad back was Anna Semyonovna, leaning forward in her dark sables. . . .

Alexei Petrovich, raising his hand to his tall beaverskin cap, stood watching where the sleigh disappeared into the blizzard. His greatcoat slipped from his shoulders, exposing the gold braid on his tunic and the cold seemed to chill his heart. . . .

The next day Alexei Petrovich paid the Mordvinskys a visit. Blushing and confused he explained to the husband that he had the honour of paying his respects to the very worthy Anna Semyonovna whom he had met at the princess' and as he made his explanations he waited wondering whether she would come out of her rooms. Mordvinsky listened coldly to the prince, his brows knit and never once raising his eyes. He was tall, stout and stooping and Alexei Petrovich, looking at his sallow face with a nose like the beak of a bird of prey and his drooping moustaches, imagined how he would frown after the departure of the guest knowing that he would have to return this unnecessary visit.

Mordvinsky, however, did not return the visit and Alexei Petrovich, after waiting a week, resolved to say something impertinent to him at the first opportunity and to fight him. . . .

Some time later as he was leaving a drawing room he met Anna Semyonovna in the doorway. She raised her blue eyes and smiled. He stood stock-still as though held there by a great force.

For some six weeks he searched for Mordvinskaya in the drawing rooms, at balls and soirees and at evening services in fashionable churches. He would not have dreamed that he could suffer so. He had become accustomed to think of her constantly with great concentration as he would of a sickness. When he entered a drawing room he always knew whether she was there before he saw her. One day when she came suddenly upon him from behind he shuddered and turned round opening his eyes wide. . .

"It seems you are afraid of me?" she asked.

Those were her first words addressed to him apart from small talk. . .

Anna Semyonovna probably paid more attention to him than to others but he considered himself insignificant and unworthy. His feeling no longer pleased him: it was involuntary in him, it seared him and sapped his strength. It was not for nothing that the people said love is like a snake. . .

Then suddenly (in the way he usually had) Alexei Petrovich confessed everything to an officer with whom he was but slightly acquainted and who was received by Mordvinsky. . . The officer gnawed at his moustache and listened attentively (they were seated in a tavern and Rumanian singers close by drowned their words); the next day the officer told Mordvinskaya everything.

On that memorable evening they met at a ball. Alexei Petrovich, grown thin and serious, passed through the crowd of uniforms, dress coats and ladies' evening gowns glancing from under drawn brows; he clanked his spurs, bowed and immediately turned away, persistently seeking her, as though he feared he would not recognize her or would make a mistake.

Anna Semyonovna stood by a column. She was wearing a

dress of green silk, simple and open, with a huge pink rose on the skirt.

"I have to have a long talk with you," said Anna Semyonovna to the prince, who, pressing his lips to her hand, neither saw nor heard anything else. He felt heavy at heart, he was sad almost to the point of tears—it was a feeling of mingled fear and joy.

"Don't be angry with me," he said softly.

They passed through the ballroom into the winter garden.

Anna Semyonovna sat down on a bench against a wall of irregular undressed stone. The stones and the ledges were covered with ivy, from above hung the strands of some creeping plant; on either side of the bench palms reached up to the glass ceiling throwing no shadows in the even light which flooded the whole place and lit the trees and flowers, the bubbling fountain and the whole fine, angry figure of Anna Semyonovna. She struck her fan against the palm of her hand, laughed and said:

"I hear you've been saying disrespectful things about me, is this true?"

Alexei Petrovich sighed and lowered his head. Anna Semyonovna continued:

"You don't answer, does that mean it's true?..."

He opened his dry lips and muttered something incomprehensible. . . .

"What, what!?" she exclaimed and suddenly added with unexpected calm. "You see for yourself I'm not very angry with you."

These words seemed to him to contain both ridicule and a peculiarly feminine kind of sympathy—it was so easy to cure sadness in this way. All his thoughts were in a turmoil, he felt that he would forget himself, and then all would be lost.

Just then Mordvinsky came in: seeing the prince he made a sour face and said to his wife:

"I have received a despatch, I am leaving."

"Yes, but I don't read your despatches," answered Anna Semyonovna. "The prince will see me home."

Mordvinsky bowed and left. There was a promise in that short word "prince". . . . Anna Semyonovna took his arm and they returned to the ballroom where dancing was in full swing. There Alexei Petrovich seemed to have become suddenly intoxicated and told her laughingly how he had been spending the days. Anna Semyonovna twitched her brows slightly whenever he gazed too intently into her eyes.

They left at three in the morning. When she entered her car Anna Semyonovna raised her grey fur coat exposing to the knee a leg in a white stocking through which the skin was visible. . . . Alexei Petrovich closed his eyes. As he sat beside her on the soft bouncing cushions he seemed to see all of her from the white stockings to the diamond necklace at her throat; he leaned back in silence and felt that her eyes, light and cold from the street lamps that flashed past, were following his every movement. . . .

At last the silence became unbearable. He thrust a finger into his collar, pulled it, opening the hooks and buttons of his fur-bordered tunic.

"There's no need to get excited," said Anna Semyonovna. Her white gloved hand wiped the sweating glass of the window and she added softly: "I will not refuse you anything. . . ."

It may have been a whim on the part of Anna Semyonovna or she had gone too far in the game; whatever it was they caressed each other until five o'clock in the morning, at first in the car and then in Alexei Petrovich's rooms, pausing only for breath. . . .

When Anna Semyonovna entered his bedroom she exclaimed: "What a narrow bed," and those were her only words.

In the bedroom, lighted only by the lamp before a golden icon, she threw her coat, dress and perfumed underclothes on to a chair and on the carpet. Alexei Petrovich touched the

things as she threw them down, swaying like a drunkard and then lay back again hurriedly on the pillows looking seriously at the young woman who seemed more beautiful than ever in the half light and, in order to be sure that it was not a dream, he pressed his lips to hers and forgot himself in the kiss.

That night was the turning point in Alexei Petrovich's life. He learned suffering, incomparable joy and he lost his will power. With every passing hour of the following day he was more impatient to repeat that which had been.... If it had been necessary he would have consented to take service with her as a coachman or footman.... He would have touched her things, looked at her, listened, kissed the seat of the chair on which she had sat.

But Alexei Petrovich was neither a coachman nor a footman. And Anna Semyonovna did not appoint a place for another meeting.

A day, a sleepless night and another day passed full of alarm.... That evening there was a charity bazaar at the Assembly of the Nobility. Alexei Petrovich had scarcely entered the huge hall before he saw her behind a counter. Anna Semyonovna was selling coarse lace and peasant embroidery. On her right stood her husband and on the left the anaemic young diplomat was twirling a monocle.

It was as though the sun had lit up everything all round him when Alexei Petrovich walked up to the counter smiling broadly.... Anna Semyonovna glanced at the newcomer, raised her brows sharply and turned to the anaemic young diplomat. Alexei Petrovich felt a catch in his breath.... He bowed. She did not offer him her hand. Her husband scarcely answered the bow.

Alexei Petrovich spent the whole evening wandering about, pushed here and there by the crowd, buying useless things, carried them around and then left them on window sills, made a circle and each time stopped near the stall where lace was

being sold. Anna Semyonovna was surrounded by officers and he could hear her laughter. An hour before closing time he looked for Mordvinskaya's coat in the cloakroom. When she appeared on the staircase leaning on her husband's arm Alexei Petrovich went up to her and, not looking at her so as not to see her cold eyes, spoke about the sale of lace. . . . She did not answer. The attendant, throwing her overshoes on to the carpet, helped her on with her coat. Alexei Petrovich bent down to the grey overshoes, turned back the skirt of her coat slightly and began to put them on, realizing full well that he was doing a terrible thing. He bent lower and lower over her sheer blue stocking, swiftly touched her leg with his lips, rose rapidly, his face a deep red and saw Mordvinsky, fully dressed, looking at his wife's feet with a strange sneer on his face. . . .

That was the beginning of the dreadful catastrophe after which Alexei Petrovich left the regiment and fled to the Miloye Estate which he had inherited from Grandmother Krasnopolskaya who had died in the spring somewhere at a German spa.

The catastrophe was the end of Alexei Petrovich's youth and it now seemed to him that there was no getting away from this life, tedious and illusory. Perhaps a new love would help him. But he felt that his heart was torn and half dead and that in order to love again he would have to be born again.

III

In order not to be alone with his venomous recollections Alexei Petrovich invited guests to his house, every evening the same ones. The guests came at dusk—the Rtishchev brothers in a two-wheeled gig, old Obratzlov in a wicker tarantass and last of all Tsuryupa, a merchant's son who had acquired some good manners abroad, came in a brougham. Today was no exception.

At the appointed hour the footman went upstairs to Alexei Petrovich and pushing open the bedroom door saw the prince lying with his head on the window sill.

Alexei Petrovich did not immediately hear the call to dinner or the announcement that the guests had arrived. The draught from the open door lifted his hair. He looked round, screwed up his eyes painfully in the light of the flickering candles in the footman's hand and said: "Let the guests sit down to table."

They usually dined in the grand hall. Along all four walls and at sufficient distance from them to leave a passageway were two rows of round pillars; six windows behind the columns opened into the garden; in the opposite wall there were false windows with mirrors in place of windowpanes; between the columns stood upholstered settees with no backs....

When the footman announced that dinner was ready the Rtishchev brothers, Tsurypa and Obraztsov got up from the settees, groaning and rubbing their hands; they sat down to table and with their elbows shifted the crystal and china on the snow-white tablecloth. The Rtishchev brothers always sat side by side—their broad backs were clothed in grey high-necked jackets with Caucasian buttons, both had shaggy moustaches, snub noses, faces betokening excellent health and cowlike eyes. The brothers were shy and waited until Tsurypa, who took the place of the host at the head of the table, took the first helping. Bald-headed Obraztsov, pursing his lips in anticipation, let his aged eyes, dull from gout, roam over the board.

"You will serve the same champagne as yesterday," ordered Tsurypa, thrusting out his lower lip.... He was in evening dress and a red handkerchief was thrust into his waistcoat as though about to take the sacrament at mass.

"And the cherry liqueur, sweetheart, you've forgotten to serve it, remember I asked you for it yesterday?" said Obraztsov.

"Yes, sir," answered the footman gloomily.

Just then a cook-boy brought in the soup. The Rtishchevs, Ivan and Semyon, spoke together, nudging each other:

"The best thing's plain vodka, your belly rumbles from champagne. . . . Semyon, pass me the mushrooms, and pour me a glass. . . ."

Tsuryupa, blinking with his lashless eyelids, ate little and did not talk; he was reserving his wit until the prince arrived.

Obraztsov tucked a napkin under his chin and sipped his soup with pleasure, the bags under his eyes quivering as he ate.

"They are right," he said, nodding towards the brothers. "Our Public Prosecutor got dangerously ill from champagne—such terrible wind he had. But, of course, you can't keep on drinking nothing but vodka and vodka. . . ."

Tsuryupa guffawed shrilly and rolled a little ball of bread along the table. The Rtishchev brothers laid down their forks, opened their mouths and laughed, the laughter pouring out, as it were, from a barrel.

"My brother was a real card," continued Obraztsov, "he'd say things that would make the ladies leave. . . ."

The footman and the boy carried round the food and drinks. Moths flying over the chandelier burned their wings and fell on to the table. The guests ate in silence, only Ivan and Semyon occasionally sighing noisily from over-indulgence.

At last the well-known limping gait was heard outside. Tsuryupa hurriedly wiped his mouth with his napkin and pulling out his monocle threw it into his flat eye-socket. The prince entered. His eyes were bloodshot, his damp hair had just been combed back; in his reserved movements and in the cut of his clothes Tsuryupa saw for the hundredth time an inexplicable elegance; in order to imitate him he had bought a triple mirror, had ordered clothes and linen from London and had driven away all his relatives, petty merchants, so that they should not hamper his style.

"Don't get up, don't get up, my friends," said the prince as he greeted them. "I hope the cook has corrected yesterday's mistakes."

The Rtishchevs showed their breeding by clicking their heels under their chairs, Obratzov stretched out to kiss the prince and Tsuryupa jumped to his feet, could not restrain himself from clapping the prince on the shoulder.

Alexei Petrovich sat down at the corner of the table, took a piece of bread and ate it. Wine was poured for him and he drank it avidly. He leaned his elbows on the table and touched his cheeks with his fingers:

"Tell me what has been happening lately. Yes, please. some more wine. . . ."

"You yourself are ever new," said Tsuryupa. "Incidentally, I have a new story. . . ."

He leaned towards the prince's ear and choking with laughter began to tell him the story. The prince smiled, the Rtishchev brothers laughed and their foreheads wrinkled as they tried to think of something amusing to tell but all that could come to their minds were dogs, damage to the hayfields, a lame shaft horse—all topics little suited to such high society.

"Since the talk has turned to girls," said Obratzov, "our dear prince is in his element. . . . He will treat us."

"Yes, yes, you must," shouted the guests, "let the prince get us some nice girlies."

"We'd better go to Kolyvan, gentlemen."

"To the inn! Let's go to Sasha's!"

"That's not like a friend—all the fun for yourself and nothing for us, no, let it be Kolyvan! To Kolyvan!"

The prince frowned. The Rtishchev brothers stamped with their heavy jackboots, perspired and shouted: "To Kolyvan! To Kolyvan!" Tsuryupa leaned to the prince's ear and whispered: "It's not nice, prince, it's not nice." Obratzov wiped his bald head with his napkin and stuck out the tip of his tongue, growing quite limp at the idea of Kolyvan. They were

all drunk. The prince, leaning on the table, dropped his head. The wine he had drunk, and the lingering effects of that of the day before, filled his head like a stuffy cloud. "Today I must get drunker than ever," he thought and smiled: Tsurypa took him by the elbow as he got up.

"Come into the garden," said the prince.

The footman immediately threw open the balcony doors, the cool of the evening entered the room and the guests walked down the steps into the damp garden.

The gravel path from the balcony led to a gully along the edge of which, half hidden in the shrubbery of briars, was a balustrade with a single remaining stone vase.

The light from the six windows of the hall fell on the vase, on half a dozen balusters visible through the foliage, on the trees and the path. Below the cliff red and yellow warning lights were burning on the wide, scarcely visible, river.

"We'll have to persuade the brothers to wrestle," whispered Tsurypa to the prince who had leaned his cheek against the vase and was gazing at the Volga thinking: "Today, today absolutely, surely I do not lack the courage."

"Persuade them," answered the prince.

The wine did not intoxicate him immediately. At first he was cautious as though forewarned of something, then he grew sorrowful almost to tears: every sound seemed distinct, things grew clear and over everything there seemed to hover a fatal end. Suddenly, like lightning breaking through a heavy cloud, he felt a sharp pain in his heart that ran down his back to his cold feet: he shook himself and the debauchery began.

While the prince had been standing at the balustrade Tsurypa had been baiting the brothers with caustic words and Ivan Rtishchev was already looking askance at Semyon.

The Rtishchevs were famous throughout the district for their strength, and at horse-fairs had often challenged some Tatar horse coper to a wrestling match between the carts in front of

an audience of landowners and peasants. When no opponents could be found the brothers usually fought each other.

"Semyon could throw you," whispered Tsurypa, nudging Ivan.

"Of course I can," answered Semyon, and Ivan was already making for his brother who thrust out his chest and snorted.

"Ugh, cowards!" exclaimed Tsurypa and winked at Obratsov, who began pushing Ivan forward with his shoulder, and with all his strength shoved Semyon between the shoulders.

The brothers snorted and clashed. Ivan seized Semyon by the waist. "Not playing fair!" exclaimed Semyon and, squatting down, lifted his brother who waved his legs in the air. Then they seized each other and whirled round breathing heavily. Tsurypa ran round them clapping his hands. The brothers staggered towards the brink of the gully, Tsurypa put out his foot and tripped Semyon who threw Ivan and both of them, crashing to the ground, rolled down the side of the gully roaring and tearing the bushes.

Alexei Petrovich laughed loudly. The cloud that had oppressed his heart had gone. Roaring with laughter he supported himself on the edge of the cold vase.

At his call a footman and the gardener came running with ropes and dragged the brothers out of the gully, panting, happy and their clothes torn. They immediately began chasing Tsurypa, who ran away across the wet grass, shrieking piercingly in an unnatural voice. . . .

A harnessed carriage was already at the door. A crate of wine was placed in the bottom of the carriage and the brothers were seated on it back to back. Obratsov squeezed on to the seat between Tsurypa and the prince. The prince pushed his hat over his eyes, Tsurypa shouted "Away!" and the horses raced downhill to the ferry and into Kolyvan.

IV

Sasha stood in the middle of a clean room that was now filled with tobacco smoke, her arms, bare to the elbow, folded under her green-clad breast.

Her sweet face with its straight velvety eyebrows was turned towards the prince, love for him streaming from her dark eyes. Sasha had just finished singing, she had paused for breath, her mouth half open and her amber beads trembling at her neck.

"Sing again, again, Sasha!" shouted the guests. Sasha smiled, nodded her head and began singing softly in a low voice as though her soul were weeping in her bosom:

*"Wormwood, wormwood,
Bitterest of grasses,
My hand did not plant you,
I did not plant you,
You, alone, from nothing.
Born in the world,
And in our green garden,
Spread 'midst the flowers..."*

The prince rested his elbows on the bare boards of the table, seized his aching head between his hands and listened. Obratsov walked up and down the room past Sasha, snapping his fingers and rolling his eyes. The Rtishchevs, their jackets unbuttoned, sat on a bench. Tsuryupa stretched out his legs, thrust his hands into his pockets and sat swaying back and forth.

Sasha finished the song. The prince immediately asked her in a hoarse voice:

"What about that other one, Sasha, you remember the one I mean?"

"It's no good," murmured Sasha. "It's not a true song and I don't like it. But for you..."

She lowered her eyelashes, took a deep breath and began to sing in a sad voice:

*"It wasn't in Moscow, it happened in Peter,
On one of the famous streets,
Where there lived a woman who killed her
own husband
Killed him stone dead with a knife."*

"Sasha!" shouted the prince, repeating the last lines of the song. "That's fine—"her right elbow on the window sill, her burning tears o'er the window sill"—but the thing's done and her lover waits under the window mocking at the old husband. Now sing that part, I like the details. . . ."

*"Around the neck,
A noose she made,
To her lover
The rope she gave. . . ."*

"It's just right—for today. Just as though it were written specially for us. Go on, Sasha. . . ."

Sasha was frightened but she continued singing:

*"A very strong knot,
It won't give way,
On that old neck
It won't give way.
The old man groans
As though he would sleep,
Legs beat the floor
As though he would creep,
Arms all outstretched
Starting to dance,
Teeth are all bared,
He's grinning askance."*

"Alexei Petrovich, I'd better sing something livelier," she said, breaking off suddenly.

The prince pushed the table away and began to clap his hands and stamp on the floor. Sasha twirled round, threw out her arms and began singing couplets to a dance tune.

Her red petticoats belled out and below them her legs in white stockings and kid boots swam over the floor in a dance. . . .

Obraztsov minced around Sasha shouting: "Look at her! Look!" Ivan Rtishchev, unable to restrain himself, put his hands on his hips and launched forth into the squatting cobbler's dance, throwing out his coattails. Tsuryupa, giggling, pulled the kerchief off Sasha's head.

"Leave her alone, you lout," shouted the prince.

Sasha's little head with its black plaits turned on its full neck like a sunflower towards the sun—her sun was the prince. He sat there pale and drunk, his mouth parched. Suddenly Sasha, pirouetting, dropped onto the bench where the prince was sitting and pressed close to his shoulder and threw her arms round his neck.

"Girls!" roared the Rtishchev brothers. "Get some girls!"

Tsuryupa, insulted, went into the other room and lay down on Sasha's bed, striving not to crumple his dress-jacket. . . .

"An interesting story," he muttered, wiping his face with a handkerchief. "Something to talk about, how our dear prince enjoys himself. . . . That's the reputed fiancé. . . . 'Lout.' I'll make him remember the lout. Ugh, you're all swine!"

Just then the door was thrown open, the bedroom was lit up, Obraztsov came flying out of the noise and tobacco smoke, made for the entrance and disappeared into the yard.

"Gone for girls," continued Tsuryupa. "Just wait a bit, I'll arrange a ball. I'll throw meat to these dogs—I'll get Shishkin's Chorus from Moscow. And if Shishkin isn't good enough I'll get Chaliapin himself. . . . Honour's a fine thing but you all love money."

For a long time Tsuryupa lay thinking what staggering

stunts he could arrange to get the better of the gentry. At last four women whose husbands were away in the army came in from the yard, whispering and holding on to each other, Obraztsov urging them on.

"What are you scared of, you fools," he whispered loudly. "We're not going to eat you, we'll give you something sweet to drink, and warm ourselves up."

The door closed behind the women. From the room came the howling and the horse-laugh of the Rtishchevs. Sasha and the prince came into the bedroom immediately.

"Where are you going, my dear? Don't go. . . ." said Sasha.

The prince did not answer but went out on to the porch. An earthenware washbasin hung from a post. In the half light that came through the door Tsurypa could see the prince—he took water up in the palm of the hand, splashed it over his face and then wiped himself. Sasha, holding on to the other post, continued pleading with him.

"She's young and she'll soon get over her love; I don't want anything from you and when you're drunk I'll put you to bed. Don't go. . . . Go tomorrow, if you must, darling."

"Stop it. What are you talking about, you must be drunk yourself!" answered the prince.

Sasha did not answer him. The prince took a deep breath, called for his carriage and went down the steps. Sasha remained standing at the post. The horses arrived, the driver coaxing them. The gates of the yard creaked and the prince's voice said:

"Volkovo. . . ."

The carriage rolled away. Sasha left the post and sat down on the steps where Alexei Petrovich had walked. Her dark immobile figure, her elbows on her knees and bare head lowered, above her the irregular line formed by the roofs of the outbuildings and the pole over the well—all this could be seen in the darkness through the rectangle of the door.

It all seemed so commonplace and boring to Tsurypa that he began to frown as he thought: "Russian landscape, to hell

with it all. I'll go to Paris for good, I've got money enough, haven't I?... And as for the prince, I'll see that the proper person knows about this. He's a real blackguard...."

Behind the door the feet beat ever louder on the floor, there were roars of laughter and shrieks, they were making merry.

KATYA

I

Alexander Vadimych gave his daughter his blessing, kissed her and then went in his slippers to the sofa where a bed had been prepared for him.

Katya closed the door of the study and drawing a shawl round her shoulders went out into the hall. The moonlight made a pattern of the window frames on the old parquet floor. The corners of the hall, where the settees stood, were in darkness. Looking at the squares of moonlight on the floor Katya raised her hand to her cheek and smiled so tenderly that her heart hammered and then stood still.

"It's still early!" she thought. "Perhaps he's waiting? No, no, I must have more patience."

She lifted the sides of her skirt, rolled her eyes, and began to twirl round.

At that moment a door slammed not far away; Katya immediately sank to the floor; Kondraty, carrying a candle and Volkov's clothes, was coming along the wall.

Seeing the girl on the floor he stopped and muttered something under his breath.

"I thought it was a ghost," said Katya, her laughter breaking through her speech. "And it's only you, Kondraty. I've lost a ring, come and look for it."

Kondraty came and bent down to the floor with his candle. "What ring? There's no ring here."

Katya laughed and ran into the corridor. . . . Behind the door she stuck her tongue out at Kondraty and stamping deliberately went in the direction of her own room but before she got to the end of the corridor, to the place where a carpet hung on the wall, she hid in a window recess and covered her mouth to check her laughter.

When Kondraty's snorting and footsteps had died away Katya tiptoed back to the hall and slipped out into the garden through the balcony door. Under the dark trees she stopped - a sudden sadness had overtaken her.

"I expect he's getting tired of me," she thought. "And if he isn't, he soon will be. What does he see in me? Could I ever be a comfort to him? He has suffered so much and I have nothing but foolishness to offer him. What a heroine!"

She became so miserable that she sat down on a bank of turf. "A real heroine doesn't eat, tosses the bedclothes about at night, and a rose lies on her breast, not like me—I sleep soundly with my nose stuck in the pillow. . . ."

Katyenka suddenly laughed out loud. The sadness, however, had not left her. . . . Far away the frogs in the pond croaked and screeched. The grass between the long black shadows of the trees looked grey in the moonlight.

Katya suddenly stretched her neck and listened, then ran along the avenue of trees holding on to the ends of her shawl. A spider's web clung to her cheek. She brushed it away and there, where the avenue turned along the pond, she cut across the currant bushes, catching her skirts in them, and took the shortest path to the boardwalk by the water. The moon stood high behind the summerhouse throwing its light on the water and the shiny leaves of the water lilies. At the folding table in the summerhouse, where they usually drank tea with their guests, sat Alexei Petrovich, his cheeks in his cupped hands. Katyenka got the impression that his wide, staring eyes were, gazing but seeing nothing.

"What's the matter with him?" she thought quickly and called: "Alexei Petrovich!"

The prince started violently and rose. Katya said laughingly: "Sleeping, sleeping! How disgraceful!" She ran to him along the rocking boards.

Alexei Petrovich pressed his lips to her hand and spoke in a hoarse voice:

"Thank you, thank you. . . ."

"Have you been thinking about yourself again?" Katya asked him affectionately as she sat down on the bench with her elbow on the decrepit balustrade. "I asked you not to think any more. You're very good. I know that, anyway. . . ."

"No," answered Alexei Petrovich softly but firmly. "Katya, my dear, it's very, very hard for me. Just to think of what I am doing. . . . Do you love me a little bit?"

Katya smiled and turned her head away, but she did not answer him. The prince was sitting beside her, looking at her hair where it lay on the nape of her neck and at her oval cheek that was reflected so clearly in the water. Higher up above her head a spider was hanging in its web snare.

"On the way here I was thinking whether I should tell you or not. If I don't tell you I shall probably never dare come here again, and if I tell you, you will turn away from me, it will be very hard for you but you will try to forget me. . . . What should I do?"

"Tell me," said Katya very seriously.

"And you won't think that I am lying or pretending?"

"No, I won't think that."

"I have done many bad things but there is one of them that worries me constantly," said the prince with difficulty and with a hoarse note in his voice. "That's what always happens: you think that you have already forgotten and then the rotten thing that you did so long ago develops into such a definite rottenness until you can't bear it any longer. . . ."

"Please, tell me," repeated Katya; her hands, holding the ends of her shawl, trembled.

"That's just what I thought, that I must tell you everything. This happened a long time ago. No, it wasn't so very long ago, just last year. . . . I met a lady. . . . She was very beautiful. But that's not what gave her such power. . . . She used extraordinary perfumes that had an inexpressible odour of depravity about them. You see, Katya, what I'm telling you. Don't do that. . . . Don't look away from me. . . . Until I met her I had never loved anybody. I had always thought that women were of the same nature as we are. That's not true. . . . Women, Katya, live amongst us but they are very peculiar and very dangerous beings. And in addition this one was depraved and as sensuous as an insect. A depraved woman is a horrible thing. I lived like one enthralled, after that meeting. . . . I felt as if I had been badly burned. . . ."

Alexei Petrovich broke off suddenly and raised his fingers to his temples.

"I'm not saying what I want to. I am tormenting you. That is all the past, remember. Now I hate her with all my heart. . . . She bewitched me, she possessed me and then threw me off like an old glove. I lost my senses and began to pursue her. . . . It was as though I were thirsty and somebody had given me water only to take it away again as my lips touched it—I reached out for it, my mouth was as parched as though it had a fire in it. . . . One evening, after a ball, I kissed her in sheer desperation, or perhaps out of sheer devilry, in full view of everybody. Next day I met the lady's husband and he invited me to his house for some tickets or other. I realized what he was inviting me for and went. It was a frosty morning and I remember how sad the snow made me feel. Her husband sat at the table in his study and dropped his head the moment I entered. He was holding a silver cigarette case in his fat hands. I watched his short chilly fingers as they tried to extract a cigarette but could not, they were trembling too much, I afterwards bought the same brand

of cigarettes. Lying on the papers on the table there was a whip bound round with white wire. I stood in front of him and still he kept looking at the cigarettes. Suddenly I said to him jauntily: 'Good morning, and where are your tickets?' and held my hand out almost touching the cigarette case, but he did not offer his hand, his fat face shook and he said: 'I find your behaviour dishonourable and disgusting....' Then I shouted at him although I do not think it was very loud: 'How dare you!' He shuddered like one in a fever, his face twitched and he seized the whip and struck me in the face. I did not move, did not feel any pain. I noticed that two buttons of his waistcoat were unfastened, like those of a fat man usually are. 'Take that,' he said, leaning across the table and slashing at my collar for I was looking him straight in the eyes. I hastily thrust my hand into my pocket and pulled out a revolver. A revolver also appeared in his hand and he moved towards me; he was even smiling from anger and I could see the leaden bullets in the dark chambers of his revolver.... It was awful! I felt that I could not die and could not kill, I backed away and tripped over the carpet near the mirror. In the mirror I saw the open door and there the lady was standing, wearing a hat and long gloves. Her lips were pressed together and she was following our movements closely. 'I'll send my seconds,' I said. The husband stamped his foot and screamed: 'I'll give you seconds, you pup! Get out of here!' I closed my eyes and raised the revolver. He struck me on the arm and then in the eyes and I fell on the carpet. I got up, went into the hall and put on my coat. He stood in the door with his whip in his hand, as though I were a guest he was seeing off, but he did not hit me again...."

Alexei Petrovich stopped for breath but began again immediately.

"There was only one thing for me to do. For three days I lay on the bed in a fever, my face to the wall. I could not sleep and recalled everything just as it had happened: how I went there, how he held the cigarette case, all my own words, the

way he struck me. . . . I began to roll about and think things over: what ought I to have done? What should I do at this moment, for instance, to get even with him. . . . I sat on the bed and ground my teeth. . . . But my will power was gone. . . . I knew that I ought to get up and go out to buy a new revolver (I had left the old one in his hall) and then should go there and kill him. But I could not do it. I tossed about on the bed and stared at the wallpaper. At last I came to the conclusion that I had to think about something else: I began to think of my regiment and of the village in which I used to spend my leave. I was sorry for myself, I wept and then fell asleep. I woke up the next morning feeling just as sorry for myself. I did not want to believe that something evil had happened. That which I had still to do was far worse. Until a short time before I had been free but now I had to go through with this to the end, I could not avoid it. The worst thing was that I had no choice. . . . I dressed, went out into the street, raised my collar and took a passing cab. gave the driver the address of my armourer's shop but then I changed my mind: a revolver would not do for that purpose. it would be better to stab him with my sword. . . . I got out of the cab near his house and began to pace up and down the street.

"I remember now that an old general with side whiskers and a purple nose passed me. The weather was clear and frosty. 'I must ask his pardon.' I thought. 'then everything will be all right again. No, no. People are unkind, they are savage and malicious, they must be insulted, beaten, humiliated. . . .' Just then an army officer ran into me, a rosy-cheeked boy, pushed me and apologized politely. . . . I had already lost my head, however, and shouted after him: 'Fool!' The officer was extremely embarrassed but seeing that I was staring straight at him he frowned, raised his little snub-nosed face to me and said: 'My dear sir. . . .' and a lot more. I insulted him and immediately challenged him to a duel. We fought the next morning and he shot me in the leg. The poor boy was so distressed

about the whole affair that he sat down beside me and cried. I lay on the snow with my face towards the clear, blue sky.... I felt great peace. That's all...."

Katya did not speak for a long time, hiding her hands under her shawl; then she asked sharply:

"And that woman?"

Alexei Petrovich jumped up from the bench and fell at Katyenka's feet, resting his forehead on her knees.

"Katyusha darling," he said despairingly, "have you forgiven me? Have you understood? It is not so easy.... Am I not revolting to you?"

"It is all very painful to me," answered Katya, pulling her knees away. "Please leave me and don't come back ... for a few days."

She got up. She offered her fingers to the prince to kiss, turned away and walked slowly along the boardwalk on the bank of the pond towards the dark trees. Behind the trees her dress, white in the moonlight, disappeared in the shadows.

Alexei Petrovich gazed for a long time at the place where she had disappeared, then went down the steps to the water and began pouring it in handfuls over his head and face.

II

Katya went to her room on tiptoe, lit the candles in front of the mirror of her dressing table, threw down her shawl, unbuttoned and took off her blouse and removed her hairpins—her hair fell over her shoulders and bosom.

But the comb trembled in her hand, she pressed the soft hair to her face and sank into a semicircular armchair.

During the past hour she had heard and experienced so much that although she still did not know what was right and what was evil, she already knew and felt that a misfortune had occurred.

No more than an hour before she had thought that she and the prince were alone in the whole world and that no one had ever loved so sweetly before. In the same way as her heavy hair pulled down her head so she felt the full weight of love pulling at her heart. Before this love she had not lived. And could have the prince really lived before he knew her? He had appeared suddenly and he, the whole of him, was nobody's but Katya's. That had been but an hour before.

"Oh, it's all so monstrous," she whispered. "To tell the whole story in such detail. The dirt will stick, it will not wash off. . . . He has always been sad, is that why? . . . Of course, he still loves her. . . . Of course he does, otherwise he would not be so distressed, he would not have told me. And he was struck in the face, in the eyes, in his eyes. . . . I did not even dare to kiss them. . . . And he did nothing, did not attack him, did not kill him. . . . Impotent, contemptible. . . . But no, no . . . if he were contemptible he would not have told me. And he lay there alone and distraught for three days. Eyes full of sorrow and torment. I would have sat on his bed, taken his head between my hands and pressed it to me. . . . Alone, alone with his sorrow and troubles. . . . And nobody, of course, who understood or was sorry for him. . . . But I won't let him be hurt. I'll go to that woman and tell her what she is. . . . Oh, my God, my God, what shall I do?"

Katya ran her tongue over her dried lips and stared into the mirror with unseeing eyes. With a slow movement she threw her hair on to her bare back. The slope of her shoulders and arms and the tops of her firm breasts, half hidden in lace, were white as marble. . . . Her cheeks were flaming. At last she saw herself and smiled proudly.

"Here I am," she thought. "Nobody has ever touched me and nobody would dare, and he—he's unclean and beaten."

She stood up quickly and undressed, slowly plaited her hair; when she had finished plaiting it she stood still for a moment thinking, tossed her head and then got into bed.

Another mirror on the wall, an oval one, reflected the low, wide bed with its carved legs that had been her grandmother's and Katya's flushed face and tightly pressed contemptuous lips on the pillows. Her lips trembled and she whispered:

"And I, too, will hurt him," and turning swiftly over on her face she cried like a little girl, her shoulders heaving.

After her tears Katya dozed off. In her high, white room two candles were burning, casting dark, warm shadows from the furniture on to the carpet. It was so quiet that one might have expected the dress, thrown on to a chair, to rustle all by itself. A cricket in one corner began its dry, tiresome chirp.

Then, from behind the bed, appeared a tall, red mannikin, dry as a straw. Without touching the floor he began jumping up and down and kicking his legs; in his hands he held thin wires. The wire flew out and entangled Katya and still the mannikin kept bouncing up and down.

Then the blanket began to turn and lay on her as heavy as a stone. Her legs refused to move. Thin red wires and rings twirled over her head, joining together and moving apart again. . . . The mannikin jumped on her chest and seized her by the throat. . . .

Katya screamed and lifted herself up on the pillows. With her outstretched arms she tried to push the weight off herself. The light from the candles stabbed her eyes and she fell back again. . . . Fever began to burn her up.

THE RENUNCIATION

I

That night Alexander Vadimych had slept well—the mosquitoes did not bite him and he awoke early as was his habit.

Opening his sleepy eyes Alexander Vadimych stretched out his hand for the jug of kvass, took a drink, grunted, turned over

on to his back making the springs of the mattress creak, pulled a savage face and with a shout of "Shoot!" sat up and dropped his feet straight into his felt slippers.

After this he decided to sit still for a moment and looked round the room with some satisfaction. The study was old and worn, nothing in it had been changed since his father's death; on one wall hung a horse collar, a painted shaft arch and a set of harness that Alexei Orlov had presented to his great-grandfather. Against the opposite wall stood a stuffed dog and a Cossack saddle on a stand. In one corner was a heap of sample scythes, sickles and spades. Nailed up over the sofa were pictures of his favourite horses and on the writing desk were bound files of an agricultural paper covering many years, all kinds of seeds in papers, an abacus, a pile of cigarette ends and similar rubbish.

Alexander Vadimych was bored during the winter months when the place was snowed under, when the blizzards howled and raged and he thought up various things to keep him busy, ordering the objects required from Berlin or Moscow. . . . Once he got hold of a machine for sharpening pencils and Kondraty hunted broken pencils everywhere and brought them to his master. . . . Then Alexander Vadimych began to take an interest in photography and the place was littered with negatives and acid in measuring glasses. Another winter he cut out model farmhouses, mills and farm machines from cardboard and pasted them together. On one occasion he heard from a visiting surveyor that electricity could be produced at home, ordered everything necessary and after considerable trouble rigged up electric light in his study; he even promised Katyenka to lay electric light to her room but the summer distracted Alexander Vadimych's attention from this amusement—with the first gurgling of the spring waters he felt the blood coursing through his veins and gave himself up entirely to noble occupations; in March he paired the horses, in April he paved the dam, in May he raced his horses and then came the mowing, reaping and

threshing and then came autumn, when everybody was properly drunk and there were weddings everywhere.

Alexander Vadimych got fed up with sitting on the bed and he called out loudly:

"Kondraty! My trousers!"

Kondraty came into the room carrying a pair of wide trousers.

"A happy rising!" he said as he bowed.

"Well, is everything all right?" asked Alexander Vadimych.

"Yes, thank God, everything is all right."

"Has anything happened?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"Did the peasants come?"

"Yes, the peasants were here."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them that the master had ordered me to chase them away."

"And what did they do?"

"Nothing. What can they do but scratch their heads if there's nowhere to pasture the cattle..."

"What sort of talk is this? You look out, Kondrashka..."

Alexander Vadimych stared so angrily at Kondraty that he turned away, swallowed hard and muttered:

"It seems as though our young lady's ill."

"What's that?"

"She took ill, tossed about all night... That's what's the matter."

Alexander Vadimych said "Hmm" and frowned. He did not believe that Volkovs could be sick and if his daughter had not slept all night it meant that a maiden's dreams had her in their grip and marriage was the cure for this sickness. The thought of his daughter's marriage made Alexander Vadimych frown. Where could he find a suitable bridegroom? The devil alone knew! The prince, of course, was indicated, but how to get him to propose. He visited the house and, it was said, met Katya in

the garden at night and still did not propose, the scoundrel. All this worried him to death and he thought it would be fine if he were to wake up one morning and Kondraty were to say, "The young lady's married, sir...."

"Oh, hell, you all drive me crazy," said Alexander Vadimych at last, turned his head, coughed and spat. Then he held his legs out to Kondraty, buttoned up the bone buttons of his wide trousers and stood up.

"Order them to harness Klausnitza to the droshky," he said and went to his washstand.

The washstand was fitted with a porcelain jug swinging on two lugs and so arranged that if you touched the spout the water came pouring out all at once. Snorting, Alexander Vadimych washed himself and put on a sailcloth jacket he had worn so long that it had adopted the shape of his body to an extent that it even showed the nipples on his breasts: then he went into the dining room.

As he sat over his coffee in the dining room Alexander Vadimych remembered his daughter, frowned again and set off down the corridor to her room.

Katya was lying in bed, hollow-cheeked and pale. She sat up and kissed her father, her hand in his, and again lay back on the pillows; placing her two hands under her cheek she closed her eyes.

"Ugh, sour-belly," said Alexander Vadimych, rubbing his nose hard with his forefinger. "Shall I send for a doctor?"

Katyenka did not open her eyes but slowly shook her head. Out of sheer stubbornness Alexander Vadimych immediately ordered Kondraty to drive into Kolyvan and bring the doctor back dead or alive. He patted his daughter on the cheek, went out on to the porch and stood with his arms akimbo admiring the grey filly harnessed to the droshky.

The filly Klausnitza rolled her bloodshot eyes, lay her ears flat and sat back on her haunches waiting till she was set free to play her pranks.

"She's a rogue," said the coachman merrily, holding Klausnitza by the bridle. "She chewed up the stableman's hand this morning."

"Such a wound wants sprinkling, Alexander Vadimych," said the stableman, removing his cap.

"All right, go to the kitchen and get a drink," answered Alexander Vadimych; as he left the porch a pleasant tremor ran over him. Restraining himself he climbed on to the droshky seat, took the reins between his fingers, pressed his cap more firmly on his head and said in a soft voice:

"Let her go!"

The coachman let go the bridle. Klausnitza did not move, she merely snorted noisily, distending her pink nostrils.

"Gee up, darling," said Alexander Vadimych and flicked the reins. Klausnitza pawed the ground and sat back. The coachman was going to take hold of the bridle again but Volkov shouted to him to leave it alone and slapped the filly with both reins.

Klausnitza leaped forward, squatted on her haunches and then reared. Volkov hit her again and she bucked, showering him with mud and raced away. . . . The stableman and the coachman ran after her. Klausnitza, however, was already on the road and Alexander Vadimych, vainly tugging at the reins, could do nothing but spit, puff and roll his eyes. The coachman and the stableman ran as far as the gate, slapped their thighs and roared with laughter: "That's something a bit tougher than kvass for you. . . ."

Klausnitza galloped off the road across grass that beat against her legs, kicked and whinnied and did everything she could to upset the droshky but Alexander Vadimych kept a firm seat, his moustaches blowing in the wind and tried to guide the filly up a hill.

He managed to do it but Klausnitza, as soon as she reached the top of the hill behind which the estate was hidden, thought of a new trick: she dropped in the shafts while galloping at full speed.

Volkov had not expected this and when the horse fell he climbed down from the droshky to help her to get up again.

Klausnitza, however, jumped up immediately herself, knocked Volkov over and made off across the field, the droshky clattering behind her....

Alexander Vadimych was more than usually annoyed and would have run after Klausnitza but there and then the heat overcame him and he lay down to get his breath beside a stack of last year's hay.

At that very moment a wicker tarantass to which a pair of sorry nags were harnessed with ropes came trotting past on the road not far from the haystack....

The people in the tarantass had had an excellent view of Volkov's disgrace; they pulled up the horses and a familiar voice called out to him.

"Alexander Vadimych, are you hurt?"

Volkov looked up at the passers-by and swore to himself. Obratsov, his head hanging down, lay asleep in the tarantass, and Tsurypa, in evening dress and patent-leather dress shoes, was coming across the grass towards the hayrick....

"He saw it, the scoundrel," thought Volkov. "Now the whole district will know that the confounded filly got the better of me."

Tsurypa came running up, pulled up his trousers at the knees and bent over Volkov.

"My God, you're unconscious!"

Volkov immediately sat up.

"What do you want with me, anyway? I was driving along, got fed up with it and lay down in the shade to rest."

"But where is your horse, Alexander Vadimych?"

"She went off, the devil take her.... That's the trouble!... She stood quietly all the time, I suppose the flies worried her."

"The horse went towards the farm, we saw it from the hill-top," said Tsurypa. "But that's nothing. I'm glad to have met

you. I was coming to see you and tell you something very important."

He bent over Volkov's ear and whispered to him.

"I must warn you that Prince Krasnopolsky, Alexei Petrovich, is a scoundrel, but that's strictly *entre nous*."

"What's the matter?" asked Alexander Vadimych, getting up on all fours and then standing at full height. He pulled down his coat and added: "More gossip?"

"I don't like gossip myself," Tsurypa continued hurriedly. "It is *mauvais ton*, but this is out of friendship for you and then there is the matter of your honour. Yesterday, you see, we went to dinner with him, I, the Rtishchevs and Obraztsov—you may admire the state he's in still. The intemperance displayed at the prince's table is positively obscene. After dinner there was every possible kind of nonsense and then he proposed that we go to Kolyvan to the girls. What sort of behaviour is that!... But I had to go with the company. We drove there. In Kolyvan they all drank beyond the bounds of decency and four naked girls were brought in."

"Naked?" asked Alexander Vadimych.

• "That's just it... Horribly disgusting, but I thought I would let the prince go to whatever length he liked. And just imagine what he did?" Tsurypa paused for a moment and looked Volkov straight in the eyes so that the latter suddenly grunted and blinked. "Imagine it—at about midnight our dear prince ran out into the yard and shouted, 'Hi, horses. I want to go to Volkovo...'"

"To me?" asked Alexander Vadimych.

"But, of course, you understand... This is a very delicate matter: of course he was coming to see you, Alexander Vadimych, but—how can I say it tactfully—people might think that it was not you he was coming to see."

For the sake of clarity Tsurypa spread out his fingers under Alexander Vadimych's nose who suddenly exploded when he realized what was being hinted at.

"Ugh, you blockhead!"

Tsuryupa, however, had already gone so far, that he did not take offence but continued in more rapid tones.

"And he actually did go to your place, and all of them, you know, started flinging indecent jokes about until I shouted that we had had enough of these foul scenes and that it was time to get away. We had left our horses at Miloye, however, and so here we are riding in a public conveyance. I have long been saying that this princeling should not be received. And is he really a prince, perhaps he is a Jew?"

Alexander Vadimych was no longer listening to Tsuryupa. He was already warmed up by the humiliating incident with Klausnitza and by now was so angry that he could not utter a word, he only sniffed and opened his mouth which even scared Tsuryupa.

"And where is that scoundrel?" said Volkov at last. "Get me horses at once! I'll thrash him."

"Excellent, excellent, we'll let these nags take us to my place and from there we'll go together to Miloye and pick up the Rtishchevs: let him answer for his doings," whispered Tsuryupa, and wriggling like a snake he ran towards the tarantass behind Volkov, pleased that he had had his revenge for that "lout."

II

Not until after lunch did the horsemen, warmed up by wine, leave Tsuryupa's house for Miloye.

Volkov, his elbows sticking out, rode in front on a hairy Siberian pony that groaned under the weight of its rider. The Rtishchev brothers rode behind him cracking their whips and shouting:

"This is life! This is the way we like it! Shoot faster."

The Rtishchev brothers did not care on whose side they were: the prince's or Tsuryupa's—it was all the same to them

as long as the wind whistled in their ears. Furthermore, Tsuryupa had persuaded them to punish immorality.

Tsuryupa, crumpled and lifeless, but dressed in a well-cut jacket, riding breeches and gaiters, brought up the rear on an English mare.

With 'the sand flying from the horses' hoofs they galloped on through the growth of elder bushes and the nearer they got to Miloye the higher Volkov raised one of his red eyebrows while the other drooped down over his eye and he thrust out his jaw, thinking all the time of new tortures that he would inflict on the prince.

Alexei Petrovich having slept a troubled sleep for the remainder of the night, took a cooling bath, had himself rubbed down with a towel and sat down at the piano in a small round hall whose windows had coloured glass in the upper half.

The piano was made in the shape of a lyre, a rosewood instrument, battered and out of tune. The prince played with one hand a tune that he remembered by heart, the *Chanson Triste*. The sun shining through the stained glass panes flooded the parquet floor where the mosaic garlands and wreaths seemed to come to life. Dull, boring engravings hung against the blue material and opposite the piano there was a portrait of a bepowdered old man in a red waistcoat with a scroll in his hand. All this—the worn sofas, the round tables and the music sheets with torn backs—obviously not in common use, was dilapidated and smelled of mildew. Alexei Petrovich swung round on the piano stool.

"They looked through those stained glass windows," he thought, "listened to the strains of waltz tunes, lay on the sofas, loved and kissed surreptitiously—that's all they did and then they died. And the house they lived their lives in, its furnishings and memories, were all handed down to me. Why? So that I should die, rot away, like the rest of them!"

He again ran his fingers over the keys and sighed; the

fatigue that had been chased away by his recent bath again overtook him and bowed his shoulders.

"Katya, darling," he muttered slowly.

With his eyes closed he imagined Katyenka as he had seen her the day before, her profile turned to the moon and her sloping shoulders under the down shawl. If he could only press his face to her shoulder and find eternal peace!

"Can't I live with Katya like a brother, loving and gentle? But would she want *such* a love? She already feels that she is a woman. That, of course, is something she *must* experience. Let her know happiness, momentary and acute. If I could only forget myself with her for a day, for a week! And then go away for ever. For the rest of my life there could remain with me a sweet sadness, a knowledge that I have held a precious treasure in my arms, have possessed happiness and myself renounced it. That has the greatest power of all. It will outweigh everything else. How sweet is the sadness that brings tears! How splendid it is! How she ran towards me yesterday and held out her arms. I should have smothered her with kisses, Oh, my God, my God. . . . I told her the rottenest things. Why? She will not understand. . . . She will not see me again!"

Alexei Petrovich passed his hand over his face, got up from the piano, lay down at full length on a sofa that the sun had warmed up and put his hands under his head. Just then a footman knocked gently at the door and told him that lunch was ready.

"Go away," said Alexei Petrovich. His train of thought, however, was broken, and he went angrily downstairs to the columned room where the table had been laid; glanced at the stone-faced footman who stood respectfully waiting, frowned (yesterday's wine still gave him a feeling of nausea) and folding his hands behind his back stood against a cool pillar. Behind the tall firs visible through the French windows, the huge sun was sinking. A wild dove cooed sadly and sweet-

ly. The leaves of an ash tree rustled, shivered on the twigs and came to rest. Everything here was ancient, centuries old, and everything was being repeated anew.

"I shall change," thought Alexei Petrovich. "I shall love her all my life. I love her so much that it makes me cry. Darling, darling, darling.... Katya will mend me. Oh Lord, let me be true like everybody else. Take this restlessness from me, take away the poison from my thoughts. Let me sit beside her all my life. I will forget, forget everything.... If only to love.... There is something I hold sacred.... There's Sasha—let her look after herself. Sasha can be tormented and abandoned! She is meek: she will burn out and then bless me with her dying breath."

Alexei Petrovich thrust a hand into his waistcoat as though he were trying to hold his heart back—it was beating faster and faster until it began to hurt him. He pressed closer to the column. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. "I need a bromide," thought Alexei Petrovich; he strode over to an armchair, sank into it helpless from a heart that was beating excessively fast.

At that very moment doors slammed in the house and he heard the sound of heavy footsteps. A scared footman came running to the heavy oaken doors, they flew open and Volkov, followed by the Rtishchevs and Tsuryupa, crashed into the room.

"Give him to me!" screamed Volkov, rolling his bulging eyes. He kicked the lunch table so that the platters rattled. "And he dares eat!" Then he walked over to the balcony doors and, noticing the prince standing between the columns gripping the back of a chair, looked him up and down. "For such doings, brother," he muttered, sticking out his lower jaw. "you get a fist in your face!"

"That's right," screamed the Rtishchevs, "hit him for it!"

Tsuryupa remained standing at the door repeating:

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, be a little more judicious!"

The prince's face turned green. He thought that Katya had told her father everything. And now he that had been crushed already must suffer further insults. Again the gleaming whip would whistle. Again he would have to lie down and bite the pillow....

Under the prince's glance Volkov suddenly calmed down, as though he were ashamed of himself. It was the glance one sees in the eyes of an injured dog when the keeper comes to it with a rope to strangle it and put it out of its misery—its only defence is in its eyes. There are some people who cannot raise a hand to throw the noose, but turn away, walk off and throw stones from a distance.

So it was with Volkov: he stopped short, lowered his brows and muttered:

"What are you staring at? You can't act the way you do, brother, even if you do come from a good family. Don't forget that I'm a father. Carouse as much as you like but don't dare dishonour my girl!"

As he said these words he again began to puff and blow; he took a step forward and screamed:

"I'll beat you up, I can't contain myself!"

"What have I done?" asked Alexei Petrovich quietly, beginning to tremble imperceptibly from an acute pleasure—the worst was already over.

"What's that? You behave disgustingly with Sashka and then boast in front of everybody that you come to my house in the middle of the night. I didn't set eyes on you at all. You have disgraced me throughout the whole district."

Alexei Petrovich got up swiftly, unable to restrain a light laugh. He seized the astonished Volkov by the arm.

"Come along, old man," and he led Volkov out on to the balcony and leaning towards his shoulder—it smelled of perspiration and horses—he said: "I love Katya, let her marry me. I've changed, old man.... Now I've got over it all...."

He choked. Volkov's head shook from excitement.

"So that's it, I understand. That's how things have turned out? Quite a different matter. I, myself, wanted. . . . Only you, brother, do everything in a hurry. You're a real rusher, brother." He wiped his forehead and ended up in a lowered voice. "I'll take a walk amongst the bushes in the garden for a bit. It's an important matter. Don't be afraid, I'll just try to come to. . . ."

Volkov, treading heavily, went down the balcony steps. The prince went back into the room, his dry fists clenched, and said between his teeth to Tsurypa and the Rtishchevs:

"Get out of here!"

Volkov did not like hesitation and meditation when he wanted something really badly. After sitting for a while amongst the bushes, therefore, he went back to the prince and said that everything had to be settled that evening. He went to the stables himself, cursed the stablemen for a long time, for the eye of a good husbandman saw so many signs of their neglect. He looked into all the stalls and into the carriage house and on his way back shouted to the prince, who was standing on the porch:

"Don't take offence, sir, but you don't know how to run an estate—fancy letting the stables get in that state! God help me. I'll soon put things in order for you."

The prince merely smiled faintly. He could not restrain that smile although he was afraid of it and felt that nothing good was in store for him. But when Volkov had selected the best carriage, had a trio of black horses harnessed to it and was driving Alexei Petrovich to his own place, the prince acted so strangely that when they were half-way there, Volkov glanced at his companion and said:

"What are you so upset about? Stop it, I tell you, pull yourself together—Katyerina won't refuse you."

When they reached Volkovo at sundown, however, an unexpected misfortune awaited them which accelerated events and

was to have a tremendous effect not only on the prince and Katyenka but also on Doctor Grigory Ivanovich Zabotkin who fluttered into the whole business like a fly into the flames.

III

On the morning of that day the gig was sent for Grigory Ivanovich.

He had thrown open the doors and windows of his cottage and was scrubbing out the fusty place with soap and hot water; everywhere he had laid down clean paper and some extremely uninteresting books he had found under the stove; now and then he stopped with a rag in his hand to look out of the window at the sun that was drying the floor and the benches so quickly.

"I love cleanliness," thought Grigory Ivanovich. "It makes your soul clean and joyous. And what a day! Geese in the water, clouds in the sky. Sheer joy!"

Father Vasily looked in for a moment and was so astonished that he asked in worried tones: "Are you quite well, Grisha?" From the first words he realized what had happened and afraid of disturbing this still unstable (as he thought) joy he smiled and went quietly away—Grigory Ivanovich did not even notice him go.

He had an idea that happiness must certainly come to him that day. And if it should not come? No, it simply had to.

A little later a gig drawn by two black horses drove up to the doctor's house. In his astonishment Grigory Ivanovich, a rag in his hand, stuck his head out of the window. The coachman jumped down from the gig, went over to the window and asked:

"Hi, tousle-head, is the doctor at home or has he gone away?" He looked into the cottage and squinted at Grigory Ivanovich. "Get a move on and call the doctor—our young

lady's taken poorly. Tell him he's wanted at Volkovo's, at Alexander Vadimych's."

Grigory Ivanovich immediately left the window and dropped his rag. His heart missed a beat and it was difficult for him to breathe. He recalled Yekaterina Alexandrovna as he had seen her, lifting her wet skirts, walking down the gangplank—he saw her gleaming head of hair, her rounded shoulders and her tall figure wrapped in silk. . . .

"And suppose it's typhus?" thought Grigory Ivanovich. "But no, it can't be."

"Hi, you," he shouted, running back to the window. "I am the doctor, I'll come in a minute!"

He already had his cap in his hand when he glanced into the fragment of glass nailed up between the windows and had a distorted view of his broad red face with the down on the cheeks and the straw-coloured hair that hung down to his shoulders.

"How disgusting," muttered Grigory Ivanovich, stepping back. "It really is a tousel-head. No, I can't go."

He sat down quickly on a bench, his forehead wrinkled, but he immediately jumped up again, seized a pair of scissors and jabbing the ends into his mass of hair began clipping away a lock at the side which fell to the floor without separating. Grigory Ivanovich put his foot on it; looking out of the corner of his eye he cut away more and more hair, starting from both sides; he realized that the scissors would not go right round to the back and that, in general, he was going crazy.

Harness bells tinkled outside and the coachman deliberately yawned loudly; Grigory Ivanovich, sweating profusely, bending his knees and twisting his neck, cut the hair away from the back of his head. He threw down the scissors and went to the washstand but there was no water there. He did not know where his coat was. The coachman struck loudly with his whip on the shutters and asked whether he would be long. Zabolotin clumped about helplessly—nothing like it had ever happened to him be-

fore—it was like a dream in which he wanted to run and his feet became rooted to the spot, and when he wanted to ward off something, his arms would not move.

“Drive there hell for leather,” said Grigory Ivanovich at last as he sprang into the gig. He continued tidying himself up the whole way, he wiped his face with a handkerchief and was in complete despair. When the ponds, garden and red roofs of Volkovo came in sight he felt like jumping out. Everything that was happening to him that day was like a dream.

Kondraty met the doctor on the porch and led him into the house. Grigory Ivanovich, breathing in the faintly decaying odour of those old rooms, immediately began to walk on tiptoe, realizing that here he had to talk daintily and make elegant gestures—for here Yekaterina Alexandrovna had walked at least once on every one of the floor boards, she had stood by every window; this was not an ordinary house, it was a miracle.

“This way,” said Kondraty, stopping in front of a carpet that covered a door. “And listen,” he swallowed hard, “don’t you give her too many of your powders.”

He pulled back the portiere and Grigory Ivanovich muttering, “Wait a bit, wait a bit, oh, all right,” pulled his coat straight, passed his hand over his face and went in. His eyes roamed round the room and immediately came to rest on the pillows where the girl’s head lay, its back to the door. Two plaits, divided by a parting, lay around her neck, an arm naked to the elbow lay on the blue quilt.

Grigory Ivanovich squinted, glanced at the red slippers lying on the carpet and the idea flashed through his mind that he, Doctor Zabolkin, was a charlatan, a bunch of dirty rags. But he immediately forgot all that.

Katya sighed and turned slowly over on to her back. Grigory Ivanovich stepped back in his fright. She blinked rapidly, then she woke up completely and her eyes turned in astonishment on the man who had entered the room. Then she lowered her eyes and blushed.

"Oh, it's you, doctor," she said. "Good morning. Excuse us for bothering you. . . . But father. . . ."

Grigory Ivanovich forced himself to approach her bedside; Katya stretched out a hand that was still warm from sleep and he, blushing a deep red, pressed her hand, pulled himself together, got out his watch but could not see the hands, began beating out the seconds with his foot, lost count of them, lost his own self-possession, let go of Katya's hand and dropped his watch. Katya slowly covered her face with her hands, her shoulders trembled and she burst out laughing, unable to contain herself.

Doctor Zabotkin went as cold as if he were in a heavy frost, he even felt nauseated, his lips twisted into a foolish smile—curse it! At last Katya, her eyes filled with the tears of laughter, spoke to him

"Don't be angry with me, my dear doctor, but for God's sake tell me what has happened to your hair?" And she laughed loudly and merrily.

In desperation he looked into the mirror, saw his wry face, the bald patches on his head ridges where he had clipped it and a queue left behind. . . .

"That was done in the dark," he muttered. "I've always been in the habit. . . ." and losing his self-control he stumbled out of the room.

IV

Kondraty was waiting outside the door in the passage.

"Listen," Grigory Ivanovich shouted desperately to Kondraty. "Run and order horses, I'm going away this very minute, I can't stand it any longer."

"Please don't be so stubborn," answered Kondraty sternly. "You're not at home now, please follow me."

Grigory Ivanovich said, "Aha" and obediently followed Kondraty down the passage to a little room under the staircase where he sat down on a trunk covered with felt.

"My name is Kondraty Ivanovich and not 'listen,'" said Kondraty after a short pause, leaning against the doorframe, "that's that. And what are you here for, to worry our young lady to death, did you clip your hair like that deliberately, out of sheer ignorance?"

"Kondraty Ivanovich," shouted the doctor, "shut up. I understand quite well myself!"

"You ought to listen and not try to make matters worse, Mr. Doctor. In any case I shan't give you horses. I held Katyenka in my arms when she was a baby and as long as I'm alive I'll not let anybody try experiments on her. She needs curing with kind words and not with powders—her illness is that of a young woman. D'you understand? All right. You made her laugh by looking so ridiculous—that's good. I was young myself once and liked a good joke. When the master swaggers about the house in good health everything goes the right way and the servants do what is required of them. Let me tidy you up. To go to her a second time looking like that would be rude and no joke."

Kondraty took up a pair of scissors and Grigory Ivanovich, obediently bowing his head, asked him:

"Kondraty Ivanovich, did you really carry the young lady in your arms?"

"Yes, in my arms," answered Kondraty and suddenly lowered the scissors and listened: somebody was walking along the passage trying the handles of the doors and then either coughed or was trying to stifle a sob.

"Seems like a stranger," said Kondraty, "doesn't it?"

The noise died down and the old servant went out with a troubled air.

Soon the sound of his voice came to the doctor: "You mustn't, you mustn't, go away," and then another voice, a woman's, speaking swiftly and pleading. Grigory Ivanovich did not care any more. He washed himself, smoothed down his hair, cleaned his frock coat and thought: "Of course I am

not handsome, even a bit ugly, in fact, but there is a certain youthfulness in my face and especially there is expression in my eyes"; he sighed restrainedly and went out into the garden to wait until they sent for him to see his patient.

Once in the garden he turned round the corner of the house, walked across the grass and sat on an iron seat, placing his hands on a green watering can that was standing nearby.

Bees buzzed around his feet on the grass, there was a smell of clover in the air; this and the warm, low sun that shone through the leaves of the trees on to the stuccoed walls of the house and Katyenka's window with the lowered blind (he guessed it was her window by the blind) excited him like music and Grigory Ivanovich, closing his eyes and turning his back to the sun, felt that his whole body was growing weaker, he seemed to merge into the light and the silence and everything—the sky, the clouds in the sky, the water, trees and fields—all merged into him. Or perhaps he himself was diffusing—giving his eyes to the sky, his soul to the clouds, his blood to the water, his hands to the trees and his body to the earth? It was just like death, a dream or love. "Never mind if I spend my whole life wandering around stinking cottages," he thought, "never mind if I am ugly and unable to die for her. but no, I can die if she would only order me to. What do I want? Nothing! I only want to live, feel, breathe...."

At this moment Prince Alexei Petrovich appeared on the balcony between columns that in places had lost their stucco so that the bricks showed through. He was dressed in a black frock coat and striped trousers, he leaned on a stick held in his right hand and with his left hand, in which he held his gloves, he brushed away a bee with a gesture of fear. The bee flew away. The prince hurried down into the garden, did not notice Zabotkin and with unusual excitement stood up on tiptoes to look at the window with the drawn blinds.

"It's impossible," he muttered out aloud. "That would be too much!" He slashed out with his stick, turned round and seeing Grigory Ivanovich, thrust out his lower lip.

"And who's that?" thought the doctor looking at the prince.

"Are you the doctor?" asked Alexei Petrovich. "Who is with Yekaterina Alexandrovna at the moment? Do you know anything?"

"But what's happened? Something wrong?"

"No, but I don't know anything," Alexei Petrovich sat down on the seat, touched Grigory Ivanovich's hand and began to speak very tenderly. "One does not hide anything from priests and doctors, does one? Tell me, perhaps there is some medicine for the heart that would stop it from hurting so, something that would enable me to keep it in control?"

"Bromide," answered Grigory Ivanovich.

"Yes, but that's not what I mean. When the prison gates are opening before a convict and he stands on the threshold and sees the sun and then somebody says to him 'We have recalled your old sins, go back. . . .' But I have reformed. . . .' 'No, go back.' Doctor, Yekaterina Alexandrovna's husband should be pure and free, shouldn't he?"

"Are you going to marry?" asked Grigory Ivanovich looking at the prince's too red lips and his troubled eyes. "What white hands," he thought and suddenly felt extremely sad.

The prince continued.

"I am no enemy to myself, let her, too, believe that I am no enemy. I am tormented more than she is. I did not go to Kolyvan for pleasure. . . . By the way, you don't know anything about it. . . . I came to ask for her hand, and. . . Doctor, if something bad happens, will you help me? I know that a denunciation is being made about me behind those blinds."

He stopped for breath, sighed, looked the doctor straight in the eyes and smiled piteously.

"Yekaterina Alexandrovna is worthy of anybody's suffering," said Grigory Ivanovich although he did not know why

he said it; in his confusion he began tipping over the watering can until the water poured out of the spout.

Just then a scream came from Katyenka's window and was drowned by a deep bass voice, somebody ran to the open window, the curtains shook and a woman's bare head dropped on to the window sill from inside the room. A pair of bare arms struggled trying to tear somebody's hairy fingers away from her throat.

Then came another woman's despairing shriek that made Zabolkin turn cold and the prince, strangely pale, jumped up from the seat repeating in a tormented voice, "Don't touch her, don't touch her, don't touch her. . . ." The hairy fingers let go of her throat and the woman's head slipped down from the window sill. Grigory Ivanovich wanted to get up but the prince fell forward on to his knees, grasping him with weakening fingers, his head hanging loose.

"It's nothing, lean back, that's better, it will soon pass," muttered Grigory Ivanovich, wetting the prince's forehead with water from the can.

THE WHIRLPOOL

I

Grigory Ivanovich, supporting the prince, led him across the balcony into the drawing room looking for a place for him to lie down quietly. The right-hand door of the drawing room led into the library. "There," said the prince, pressing his hand. The sound of voices, cries and stamping feet came from somewhere in the house.

The prince and Zabolkin had scarcely entered the library before the door leading from the passage was thrown open and in the half light the stableman and coachman could be seen leading Sasha by the arms. Her black sarafan was torn, her hair

was tousled and her tearful face with her raised eyebrows was thrown back. Sasha kept repeating softly and despairingly:

"What are you doing? What are you doing?"

Kondraty pushed her along from behind. Volkov, banging the door with his fist, cursed and shouted:

"Lock her up in the barn, the hussy!..." He did not see the prince and Zabotkin who had already gone into the library.

Sasha was taken away. Volkov slammed the balcony door and went cursing into the house.

Grigory Ivanovich and the prince sat for a long time in silence on the sofa beside a bookcase—the doctor's knees were trembling and the prince sat immobile, the back of his head leaning against the sofa and his eyes closed.

"What are they doing that to her for?" whispered the doctor at last looking at the prince—his face, scarcely visible in the twilight, was very handsome. "That's how one should love," thought Grigory Ivanovich, "beautifully and with great strength; one should faint and feel unusual passions! He'll make a real husband for Yekaterina Alexandrovna. Books are written about people like that." He stretched his hand out warily and stroked the prince's.

"Doctor, will you stay with me?" asked Alexei Petrovich in a low voice.

Grigory Ivanovich nodded his head.

"Have they taken her away?" asked the prince. "That's terrible. Life is not so simple, my dear doctor. Poor Sasha!"

Alexei Petrovich suddenly sat up as though he had thrown off a mask.

"I know what is noble and what is honest but still I act ignobly and dishonestly, and the baser the act the better I like it. . . . It's enough to drive me mad. And what could be better than to see yourself as others see you: a scoundrel sits in a carriage in a grey hat and gloves and nobody strikes him across the eyes, everybody respects him and he is pleased with himself. You choke when you realize it to the full. And isn't it strange

—I go home from here at night, after leaving Yekaterina Alexandrovna and I look up at the sky and the moon (there must be a moon) and I laugh quietly in my happiness, so softly the coachman can't hear me. And immediately, when I look at myself impersonally I see that it would be monstrous to do something rotten. My hands still smell of her perfume. And when I, overcome by my own feelings, stop the horses in Sasha's yard, go into the house, take her by the hands and lay my head on her breast and deceive her: 'Sasha, darling, comfort me,' and she comforts me in the way she knows. And after she has comforted me I tell her why I have come—that's the rottenest thing of all. Again I lie to her and her heart breaks. . . . And so she gets more and more wound up until the spring breaks, like it did just now."

"But listen, this is all so monstrous, you must have gone out of your mind," whispered Grigory Ivanovich, moving away from him. He did not understand everything but felt that the prince, twisting and writhing like a snake, was showing his true self. Grigory Ivanovich was confused and disgusted. He began pulling at his beard, stood up and walked about the room.

"Yes, it's monstrous," continued the prince and his voice was as even toned as though he were watching himself. "But what is still worse is that I have now lied to you too. . . . It is very difficult to tell the real truth: you twist around somewhere near it, you're just about to say it and when you look you can't see the truth any more, you have run away from it along a winding road. It's like keeping a diary. . . . Have you ever tried? Then don't. . . . I have presented myself to you almost as one tormented by the greatest troubles. . . . What sort of troubles do I bear? I'm simply a man with a defect, with a crack—like this leg: the bullet went in here; I seem to be able to straighten the leg right out and then it begins playing tricks on me, look, it's twisted away to the side again. . . . The main thing is not to expose my real nature. . . . Yes, yes, I need to drink much too much before I can let you see me as I really

am. . . . My dear doctor, believe me, I love Yekaterina Alexandrovna more than my life and if she refuses me now I am lost. That's the truth. . . . I learned it yesterday: yesterday was the final test and I did not pass it—although, of course, there wasn't really any test, just plain debauchery—in the night I drove here and purified myself in Yekaterina Alexandrovna's beauty, in the moonlight and in my confession. . . . The dear girl, I threw a burden on to her that was too heavy for my own shoulders. This morning I sent the coachman to Sasha and told him to tell her: 'Don't dare think about the master any more, the master's going to get married. . . .' Sasha could not stand it and came running here on foot. . . . I knew that she would tell them."

"It's all lies!" suddenly exclaimed Grigory Ivanovich; he wanted to add something but stuttered and again began running up and down the room, pulling at his beard.

"Doctor," muttered the prince in a scarcely audible but supplicatory voice, "go to Yekaterina Alexandrovna and tell her everything, she will understand."

"I shan't go and I shan't tell her anything!" shouted Grigory Ivanovich. "Explain it yourself. I don't understand anything and I can't stand lunatics."

He pressed his hot forehead against the glass. It was quite dark and beyond the trees, the moon, which still gave no light, was rising like a huge, almost round, orange mirror that reflected the whole sad world.

"What shall I tell her?" thought Grigory Ivanovich. "That he's an egoist and a madman? But then he loves her? I don't know. . . . I don't understand such love. I would look at her and cry, I wouldn't even say anything to her. . . . Can you tell a cloud how you love it?"

While Grigory Ivanovich was wrapt in meditation the moon began to shine more brightly, its cold light touched the dew on the leaves and cast long shadows. A light haze curled over the grass. Through the library windows the moonlight lit up a

half of Alexei Petrovich's face and his hand, the thumb of which was thrust into his waistcoat. The bronze corners of the bookcase shone in the moonlight.

Suddenly Grigory Ivanovich shuddered: Yekaterina Alexandrovna walked swiftly past the window (he recognized her by the lines of her shoulders and her proudly held head), looked round when she reached the turn in the avenue and then ran—her white shawl streamed out behind her....

"She has run into the garden," said the doctor quickly, turning round.

The prince jumped up and opened the French window.

"Come on, hurry up," he whispered.

They ran out into the garden.

II

A wooden barn stood alone in a field between the ditch that marked the boundary of the garden and the haystacks. Sledges and harrows were piled up under its eaves. The door, which had a small square hole cut in the bottom for cats to go in and out, was fastened by a heavy padlock.

Sighs and soft weeping could be heard behind the door.

Yekaterina Alexandrovna ran across the field from the ditch to the barn and stopped, panting, at the door; she dropped on to her knees and lowering her head to the cathole called out:

"Sasha, are you here? Are you crying?"

The weeping behind the door ceased and Katyenka felt Sasha's breath on her face, she could even distinguish her eyes.

"I would let you out," she said, "but I haven't got the key."

Sasha sighed. Katyenka put her hand through the hole and stroked Sasha's cheek.

"I'll ask Kondraty and he'll take the key away from papa without his knowing and we'll let you out, only a bit later.

Sasha, tell me something. . . . Put your cheek down lower and I'll kiss you. . . . Darling, is it very painful to you? I'll make him come back to you. You didn't understand, he was joking with you. He said a lot of nonsense about me. . . . He didn't come here to see me only, he came to papa as well. You did blunder so, why did you say everything in front of papa? Sasha, nothing bad has happened. Think it over quietly. He'll come back to you tomorrow."

Sasha, however, began weeping more than ever and beating her head against the door. Katya pressed her hands to her temples and looked round to see if there was anything she could do to pacify her.

"There is nobody more unfortunate than me, dear young lady," said Sasha. "I would go through torture for him—and I know everything, I know that he was lying to me and laughing at me and he was flattered when he saw that I was tormented. And then I could not stand it any longer. . . . And when the stableman came and said, 'The master orders you to forget all about him.' 'Yes,' he said, 'and he orders you to go to bed with me.' And he was laughing all the time. I was stupefied. . . . My foolish wits were all muddled and I ran out of the gate wondering whether I should fly to him or jump into the river. And there was my cousin going by in a cart and she shouted out: 'Can't wait for your prince to come, what? Come down the road a bit and shout for him . . .' I didn't know I could get so awfully mad. Then I thought that I would let you know, young lady, what sort of fellow he is, that man of ours. . . ."

Yekaterina Alexandrovna got up from her knees with a swift movement and then sat down on the threshold, facing the pond. The dark figures of horses stood out on the bank. The empty moon already floated high up in the sky extinguishing all the stars near it.

Her chin resting in her hand Katyenka sat thinking and swallowing her tears. "How silly it all is! I have been well

punished and I must forget him, forget." It seemed to her that the light of the moon was fluffy and unclear in the blue waste.

"Lady," called Sasha, "dearest, be patient with him, love him, you're a woman yourself. If I had my way I wouldn't let you have him. It is hard on me. My summer is over, now it is your turn to suffer. . . ."

Katya did not listen to the end but stood up and looked at the door; she wanted to answer but did not and walked away from the door. As she turned the corner of the barn she cried out softly and stood still.

The prince was sitting on harrows that had been folded up with the teeth down.

"What time can it be?" asked Katyenka looking across the field where in the distance the doctor was making desperate signals to the prince. "I expect papa is waiting with supper."

The prince stirred. She turned round quickly and went to the house.

III

Apart from everything else Volkov was extraordinarily stubborn. The prince's proposal had unexpectedly settled all his troubles, and was furthermore flattering to Alexander Vadimych; the Krasnopolskys traced their name back to Rurik and had once ruled a principality. Thinking about Rurik (on the way back from Miloye) Alexander Vadimych had felt injured; he imagined that the prince might think too much of himself and immediately began pressing him with his shoulder into the corner of the carriage so that it hurt him. Alexei Petrovich, however, did not understand such finesse, Volkov could not keep up his anger for a long time and, in order not to think any more about humiliation, decided that he would provide his daughter with an unheard-of dowry and had already begun to talk about it when that idiotic woman started all the scandal

the moment they arrived at Volkovo. Everything had gone to the devil.

After his first rage with Sasha had died down, Alexander Vadimych realized that by storming around he was not getting anything done; the situation however was really unbearable and, thoroughly depressed, he went into his study and sat down at the table.

"I'll burst but I'll marry her to that scoundrel," thought Alexander Vadimych; he cursed the prince roundly and then grew angry with his daughter.

Long meditation brought Alexander Vadimych to the astounding idea that it was all nonsense and that no tragedy had occurred between Katyenka and the prince—what did it matter if he was a bit wild, that's what the world was divided into two parts for and without it life would bore one to death.

Then he struck his fist on the table and exclaimed: "I'll make peace between them!" In order to get himself into a fit state of mind he deliberately began to think about things that were more or less pleasant.

With this idea in mind he took a pencil, a sheet of paper that was fly-bespattered and started drawing a hare.

"Ugh, he's scuttling off, bandy-legs," muttered Volkov. "And d'you want me to send a fox flying after you?" He drew a fox behind the hare. "You want that hare, do you?" continued Alexander Vadimych. "Ugh, you hussy, and are you afraid of a wolf? Here he is, the big-head, running with his tail stuck out. He'll eat the pair of you, little dears. And I'll send the dogs after you, big hairy dogs with spots, to tear you up. Sock him, my beauties, sock him, darlings, don't let him go. Tally-ho!"

Volkov got so excited when he had drawn the dogs that he lifted himself from the chair and seized it with both his hands as though it were a horse he was riding. Then he put the pencil down, laughed and, satisfied with himself, went out of the room; on the way he ordered the footman to call everybody for supper.

The cook's two sons set out to round up the guests for supper. Volkov went to his daughter's room. Katya, fully dressed, was sitting on her bed.

"Come on, daughter, we've had a lot of excitement, come and get your supper," he said; when Katya was about to refuse he snorted so forcefully that she immediately answered:

"All right, Papa, I'll come."

The cook's boys found the guests in the field where the prince and the doctor were walking from the barn back towards the ditch. The prince hurried back to the house immediately he was called but Grigory Ivanovich started telling the boys that he didn't want to eat and asked them to get him horses. Then he trotted after the prince.

In the smaller dining room Alexander Vadimych greeted his guests with the words:

"Gentlemen, I presume that whatever may have happened here the stomach still holds its own. Take your places, please."

Pointing to the round table he sat down himself first and tucked a napkin round his neck.

It was at this moment that Yekaterina Alexandrovna came in, very pale and with shadows under her eyes. Without looking at anybody she sat down swiftly opposite her father. Her face was calm and proud, but there was a scarcely noticeable trembling of the vein on her bare throat and neck.

"Ah, here's our invalid!" exclaimed Alexander Vadimych. "Katyusha, you haven't greeted the prince. . . ."

"I have," answered Katya, sharply.

Alexei Petrovich sat up straight in his chair looking as though he could not get enough air. Grigory Ivanovich lowered his head and scratched the tablecloth with his fork.

Alexander Vadimych, however, was not to be put off so easily. He seized hold of his moustaches, leaned on the table and looked round at the company with merry, twinkling eyes. The silence, however, continued. Kondraty, moving noiselessly,

passed round the plates and filled the glasses with wine. The doctor, whose palms were wet with perspiration, was the first to look up at the host—in Alexander Vadimych's eyes there were flashes of irrepressible laughter.

"What's this nonsense!" he shouted, slapping his hand on the table. "All of you sitting here sulking. As if it mattered! Katka, don't pout! And seeing that there's a doctor here I'll tell you what I want, a grandson. Ugh, you rogues, you don't like that, do you? Everything has been arranged. . . . And that's all there is to it. . . ."

In order to get things really going he burst into roars of laughter, so infectious that it seemed as if everybody, even Kon-draty, would have to hold his sides. Alexander Vadimych, however, saw through the slits of his half-closed eyes that the laughter had not been a success. The prince's face showed a strained smile, Grigory Ivanovich was about to take a bite of chicken leg, but stopped with his hand in the air, his forehead furrowed by wrinkles of torment. Katyenka raised her eyes to her father and they were dark with wrath and sorrow.

"Papa, stop it or I'll go out," she said, hardly able to retain herself. Her cheeks were flushed a deep red. She stood up.

"Stop! Don't you dare leave!" shouted Volkov, angry by this time. "I make this announcement: here is the bridegroom and here is the bride. Go to her, prince, fall at her feet and ask her forgiveness."

The prince, terribly pale, slowly put down his napkin and stood up. Shrugging his shoulders self-consciously, his knees trembling, the prince went to her and spoke in a repugnant voice.

"I hope, my dear, that you will forgive me my past," and he seized her hand and pressed it.

Slowly, as though in a dream, Katya turned a greenish pale, pulled her hand away and struck the prince heavily across the face.

IV

And so the supper that Volkov had so cunningly planned came to a sudden end. The prince stood still, his head bowed, his face towards the doors through which Katya had disappeared so swiftly. Grigory Ivanovich covered his face with his hands. Volkov himself, holding knife and fork, was furious and his eyes were rolling.

Suddenly Kondraty came in. His mouth was pressed determinedly tight, his eyes flashing; with his thumb he pointed over his shoulder and said:

"The stableboy reported that that woman, the one who was just here, has run away from the barn and he's worried about her dawdling near the water..."

"To hell with the woman!" screamed Alexander Vadimych in a voice that was not his own. "Go to hell with that woman! Understand that?"

Kondraty, shaking his head, disappeared. Volkov tore the napkin from his neck, paused to think, ripped up the napkin and then went down the passage swiftly after his daughter.

The prince sat down at the table, poured himself some wine, rested his reddened cheek on his hand and smiled wryly.

"This doesn't really matter," he said.

Grigory Ivanovich immediately left the table, trembling so that his teeth chattered. Far away he could hear Volkov stamping to the far end of the corridor and from there came dull sounds of his voice.

"Funny expression, isn't it, 'dawdling near the water'?" said the prince.

He smiled, shrugged his shoulders and walked on tiptoe to the door; for an instant he leaned weakly against the door-frame and then went out.

"They will all perish today," thought Grigory Ivanovich. "What are they doing? It's all that prince... He's like an infection. Why shouldn't they drive him away? I should drive

him out and say: don't worry, Yekaterina Alexandrovna, I love you like. . . . Like what? I'm just a fool. I'll walk home from here this instant. I can't understand what's going on here. What sort of love do they want? They want torment, not love, that's it. I can live without her, I've enough of my own, enough to last my whole life. . . . She will poison herself right now, she's sure to poison herself, and I'm worrying about my own cares. What was I so pleased about? If I was, then I'm the worst scoundrel on earth. Everybody thinks only of himself, the prince and Volkov and I, and that's how we've managed to torture her. . . . My poor, unfortunate girl. . . ."

Grigory Ivanovich was so mixed up in his distress that he did not know whether to go away or wait. In order not to hear those terrible voices at the end of the passage he went out into the garden and stood under the dark shrubs trying to recall what other trouble there had been and he walked across the pastureland to the barn.

"And Sasha has been dragged into this whirlpool," he thought looking at the open door of the barn. "The way the water whirls in a funnel, it sucks everything into it. . . ."

Suddenly he realized what the prince's words had meant: "funny expression 'dawdling near the water.'" Sasha had thrown herself into the pond. . . . Of course. . . . She had run out of the barn door straight across the field and into the pond!

Grigory Ivanovich gasped and ran, swinging his arms. On the edge of the pond, where the water was dark from the shadows of the willows, Kondraty and the stableman were standing. At their feet Sasha lay flat on the grass. The stableboy, sitting on his heels, was looking at her motionless white face with the open mouth.

"It's all right," said the stableman to Grigory Ivanovich as he ran up. "When I pulled her out she was still breathing, she's getting her breath back."

"She'll get her breath, she's fainted," said Kondraty.

Grigory Ivanovich sat down beside Sasha, opened her black

blouse, tearing off the buttons, and placed his ear under her firm, high breast—she was still warm. Then he began to work her arms, press her stomach and to raise and lower her heavy body. The stableman helped him, chatting all the time.

"We saw a woman running. 'It must be her,' I said to myself and I shouted, 'Sasha, hi, Sasha.' She didn't answer but came straight on, she shook as though she were ill. I asked her if the master had let her out. She said he had. And she looked at the water. 'Where are you going, Sasha?' I asked. 'Good-bye,' she said and suddenly began crying bitterly and ran towards the dam. I laughed, she was weeping so hard. She went on to the dam and then asked: 'Stableman, are you there?...' 'Go on,' I said, 'get across the dam' and I was scared myself.... Suddenly she went ... flop! ... into the water...."

"It wasn't you she called from the dam," said the stable-boy.

"You shut up," snapped the stableman and flicked the boy with his fingers on the back of his cropped head. "Cheeky kid!"

Grigory Ivanovich, bending down to Sasha's mouth, tried to blow air into her and with his hands pressed back her shoulders to expand her chest. Suddenly her cold lips trembled and Grigory Ivanovich turned sharply away as though from an unexpected kiss. Sasha stirred. They lifted her and sat her up. Water poured out of her open mouth. Sasha rolled the whites of her eyes and groaned.

"Take her to the gardener," said Kondraty. "Oh you women. all fools...."

V

At the end of the white passage Katya stood with the back of her head against the hangings of her door, her lips pressed stubbornly together, listening to her father's words: the latter was trying to seize her hand but she kept them behind her. The prince stood some distance off under a hanging lamp.

"I'll make you apologize," reiterated Volkov, stuttering in his anger. "Where did you get that habit from—slapping people's faces? Who taught you that? Give me your hand, give it here. Apologize, I tell you!"

Katyenka, however, pressed still closer to the brightly coloured hangings, her plait of hair had come undone and lay on her shoulder, her round knee pulled tight the grey silk of her dress that was drawn in at the waist under a high bosom.

The prince took note of her every movement and looking at her knee he felt a familiar pain in his breast. The sensation was clear and acute. The accidentally bent knee seemed to tear aside all veils and he saw Katyenka as a wife, a woman, a lover. He bit his dry lips and moved along the wall.

"Are you joking, or am I asleep?" continued Alexander Vadimych, who had never before had so many unpleasant things happen to him at once. For a moment he wondered whether it was all a bad dream, but he immediately began stamping his feet and shouting: "Answer, you block of stone!" But his daughter did not say a word and he again said, absolutely at his wits' end: "Ask his pardon, come on, ask his pardon!"

"No, I'd rather die!" said Katyenka brusquely. She looked at the slowly approaching prince and drew her brows together. She did not realize what he was looking at, why he was coming closer to her, she even stretched her neck to look at him and suddenly realizing what was happening, blushed deeply and raised her hand. . . .

Alexander Vadimych stretched out to seize his daughter's hand, did not catch it and grunted angrily, while the prince approaching close to her, spoke in a dull voice: -

"Yekaterina Alexandrovna, once more I ask you, with deeper respect, for your hand. Please don't refuse me."

His eyes were dry, unblinking, terrible, his face was strained.

"There, you see, Katyenka," exclaimed Volkov. "Oh you children, drop it and kiss one another!"

But Katyenka did not answer, she only bowed her head and when her father was about to push the prince towards her she slipped quickly behind the hangings, slammed the door and turned the key.

"D'you see that?" shouted Volkov. "No, that won't do!"

He tried his shoulder against the door but it would not budge, then he began hammering on it with his fists and at last turned round and kicked it with his heel.

"Never mind, leave her, let's go," whispered the prince in unwonted excitement. "I know what she'll answer, for God's sake, let's go."

It took him a long time to persuade the stubborn Volkov. At last the latter wiped the perspiration from his face and said:

"You see, brother, it's no easy job marrying off your daughter—makes you sweat. Only you please keep quiet, don't make a fuss. I'll fix things myself."

When the hammering at the door had ceased and the footsteps died away in the passage, Katyenka threw herself face down on the bed and seized the pillow in both hands.

"That's what he needed, it'll do him good," she repeated, seeing (as though the pillow were transparent) Alexei Petrovich's eyes, dry and terrible. She feared to understand what she had read in them; Katyenka repeated her angry words but they had lost their strength and their meaning as though all her anger had gone into that disgraceful slap, as though with that one blow she had linked herself up with the prince more closely than love ever could.

"Oh Lord, make it so that today has never been," she repeated, unable to get her breath and seeing no way out. Her hatred, anger, jealousy, all her proud will, had been shattered like glass by that one slap—he would take her now as *his own* and if he wanted to he would abandon her: he could do as he would....

The memory of how he came towards her, buttoning his coat "I hope, my dear ..." burned her like fire. "Of course,

that's all pretence—he suffered when he told me that story in the summerhouse. Perhaps he was lying? He didn't say anything about Sasha.... Found somebody to love!... That's not love, of course, it's disgusting, unbearable debauchery! And then it wasn't for nothing that father almost strangled Sasha." The recent scream resounded in Katyenka's ears. She sat up quickly on the bed. "And who is he to make people suffer so much? Why does he lie? Whom does he want? What does he want with the other one and Sasha and me? Whom does he love? What does he want me for? I suppose he needs me for something. Is he of another world? Has he never loved me? What can I do? I know, I know, he'll insist that I marry him, I know. And I shall. I shall and I'll have my revenge, to spite everyone I'll marry him. Don't let him dare compare me with the others.... I'll accept the torture deliberately. I haven't been able to love and don't want to.... I don't want any love."

Katyenka lowered her white-stockinged legs over the edge of the bed, rested her cheeks in her hands and tears dropped on to her dress and on to her knees. With fresh keenness she felt that there was no life for her now, no way out; she suppressed a scream and the tears came still faster.

At last her long period of crying eased her. Still sighing and with trembling shoulders she slowly removed her crumpled dress and went over to the mirror. In the tall mirror, lit from both sides, she saw her face and it looked quite different. "You're quite a beauty, my poor, dear Katyusha," she whispered in despair and studied her face closely. Then, until long after midnight she sat at the mirror thinking of herself, sadly and silently, as though that day had brought the end of her joy in life.

FATE

I

The prince remained at Volkovo. He had been given the best suite of rooms and everything needed for his comfort had been brought from Miloye. Alexei Petrovich did not go anywhere out of that suite of rooms. In the mornings, carefully shaved and dressed, he lay down on the sofa and in this manner spent his whole time, looking at his fingernails and thinking. Whenever Alexander Vadimych stuck his head in the door to report on the state of the negotiations with his daughter, the prince would pretend to be dozing.

Alexei Petrovich realized to the full that only here, close to Katya, could he find his last salvation. He also realized that with every day of his stay at Volkovo the chances of Katya's consent increased: the whole district was already talking about the slap in the face and about Sasha, with the addition of such details that made the ladies flee from the room. As far as Alexander Vadimych was concerned such a state of affairs seemed the most suitable. In the morning he would go to his daughter's room and sit in the armchair at her window.

"What a stink of face powder in here," he would say. "Making yourself look pretty?" And in answer to her look of indifference he would snort and continue. "I don't know what you girls want, you want an angel, do you? Take your late mother—she was a very well-bred woman with an English upbringing, but I went after her and she married me, although she cried a lot about it. That's how matters stand, daughter, you'll cry and you'll be a princess."

He would leave his daughter and go to Alexei Petrovich and if the latter was not pretending to be asleep would sit on the sofa at his feet, tap him on the knee and say:

"She's giving way. A devil of a girl. And you had to get mixed up in such a dirty business! If you made a mistake, you

should not have talked about it. One thing I don't understand, why didn't you propose before this? I could have married you and you could have gone abroad."

"I really don't know why I didn't propose before," answered the prince and, after Volkov had left, laughed to himself.

The first meeting between bride and bridegroom took place on a garden seat. Volkov brought the prince first and then Katya, exclaiming, "Good Lord, the calves are in the raspberry bushes," and ran away.

For a long time the prince and Katya sit in silence. Katya fidgeted with the edge of her shawl, the prince smoked. At last he threw his cigarette away, and turning from her, said.

"If you had come to me willingly, had loved me, I would not have married you."

Katyenka went terribly pale and her fingers got entangled in the fringe of the shawl. But still she did not speak.

"Let's put an end to this, let's get married," he said, softly and sadly.

Katya's cheeks burned with shame and anger and she turned sharply to him.

"I hate you," she cried. "You torture me! You are deliberately ruining me! Couldn't you find anybody else in this world?"

"Katya, you're very clever, you must understand," he interrupted her hurriedly. "Shall we get married next week?"

"Yes," she answered in a scarcely audible voice, got up, stood still for a moment, and then went away without turning round.

II

“*

The use of the so-called "corpse-reviver" is of very ancient origin. The "corpse-reviver" is prepared from grated cabbage, horse-radish, grated radish and the brine of pickled cucumbers; it is eaten after banquets.

There was, however, no "corpse-reviver" that could have dispelled the fumes of the Volkov wedding at which almost the entire district gathered. Carriages, gigs and coaches of all sorts rattled merrily along the post roads and country lanes as though on their way to a fair—it was difficult to imagine where so many gentry appeared from in the district.

There was room only for the old people, the ladies and girls in the little Kolyvan church, the remaining guests sat around the church porch, holding flowers and oats with which to shower the prince and princess.

Father Vasily, wearing his golden robes, read the service in a honeyed voice, the young couple stood on a crimson rug and near them a boy in a blue shirt held an icon. The church was filled with the light talk and whispers of the well-dressed ladies. Yekaterina Alexandrovna, with a candle in her hand, gazed at the light seriously and serenely.

"So sweet. An angel!" whispered the ladies.

The prince, looking very small in his black frock coat, serious of mien and pale, was following the solemn marriage service attentively.

When the priest offered the wine the prince scarcely touched the rim of the chalice with his lips but Katya drank the wine to the dregs, not pausing for a second, as though she were suffering a great thirst. The choir sang a hymn and the priest joined the hands of bride and bridegroom. Katya, freeing herself from the stiff silks with a jerk of her knee and dragging her train after her, walked quickly round the lectern and everybody saw how badly the prince limped trying to keep up with his bride.

"He's small fry compared with her," decided the ladies.

The guests, headed by the young couple, made their way from the church to Volkovo. As they left Kolyvan, Katya saw Doctor Zabolotkin—he had climbed on to the fence and was waving a handkerchief. She turned quickly away.

* In the great hall Alexander Vadimych, carrying an ancient

icon, the Miraculous Saviour, met the young people, blessed them and in full view of all the guests ordered the dowry to be brought. Four boys in crimson shirts brought in a huge silver tray with stacks of gold coins on it.

"Here, prince, don't think poorly of us, we give what we have got," said Volkov.

After receiving his blessing the prince and princess disappeared through different doors, changed their clothes and, finding each other again in the garden, sat down by the pond until the carriage was ready. The guests turned out on to the porch and crowded the windows; with loud shouts they sped the parting couple on their way. Volkov's eyes were moist. The banquet lasted until sunset. At dusk, in the neighbouring room, where a month before Katyenka had danced in the moonlight, an orchestra began playing. . . .

Soon, however, there were few gentlemen left still capable of holding on their feet and the girls had to dance with each other. The gay young sparks retired to the smoking room whence came loud roars of laughter. The old people took to the card tables. By midnight, the conductor, who was still waving his baton, fell forward on his nose, grabbed the big drum and rolled to the floor with it like a corpse.

This put an end to the dancing and the ladies with daughters drove away while the young men and the husbands without their wives spent the night there—some playing cards, others running wild in the house until morning. In the garden the Rtishchevs gave a demonstration of their strength and Alexander Vadimych, who had long since lost his head, now tried to separate squabblers, now sat down to the card table, staring unseeingly at the cards and the candles, all the time trying to remember something.

Neither the pale dawn nor the hot July day had any cooling effect on the guests and it was only on the third day that the last of them left Volkovo to drive madly across country behind horses eager for exercise, chasing and overtaking each other,

their harness bells clanging, scaring the peasants who, removing their caps, stood for a long time looking after the people in the disappearing carriages.

"Ugh, the dust you raise, you fat-bellied old devil," they would say.

III

Doctor Zabolkin sat on the fence and waved his handkerchief after the newlyweds, expressing sincere satisfaction that at last everything had been properly fixed up. All this time Grigory Ivanovich had lived in a haze of sentimental satisfaction with himself and the world at large. This feeling of complacency had begun at the time when Sasha had been taken to the gardener's booth and laid out on the wooden bed and he had remained alone sitting beside the young sleeping woman.

A candle end stuck in a bottle standing on a barrel lit up the board walls of the booth, there were spider webs in the corners, and the broken window was overgrown with shiny black ivy; Sasha lay on the bed between the stove and the wall, covered with a sheepskin coat.

Occasionally she shuddered in her ague, pulled at the sheepskin coat and exposed her bare legs, or the skirt of the coat would slip down and Grigory Ivanovich would get up and carefully straighten it.

Bending over her he looked long into her face—it was humble and he felt that in a dream he had somewhere seen and loved that face with its sweet clear-cut features. His spirit was calm, the whole of that day had become a memory and it was strange now to think of some other world outside that dilapidated hut and the sleeping Sasha.

Grigory Ivanovich again sat down by the candle and shielding the light with his hand listened to Sasha's breathing or to a bird suddenly awakening and disturbing the leaves of a bush or to the leaves of an aspen that had suddenly begun to rustle.

The breeze that came through the window made the candle flicker and Sasha's face seemed to be wearing a frown from the shadows that moved across her eye sockets. It occurred to Grigory Ivanovich that it was only this silence, full of significant meaning, that he should love, and that he should now become as serene and tender as the shadows on Sasha's face.

"How desperate she must have been, what torment she must have suffered, if, without making any complaint, she hurried, hurried to reach the pond, the water, the end. Who am I compared with such torment? A gnat, a piece of dirt," thought Grigory Ivanovich. "I came crawling to rich people, people revoltingly happy, I came here conceited, with my red mug. . . . Disgusting, quite disgusting. She will wake and ask how she is to live now. What can I answer her? That I will serve her to the end of my days—that's how I ought to answer. Here is a simple and clear task, here is a purpose in life: to serve such a woman, to help her forget. . . ."

Grigory Ivanovich did not notice that he was talking aloud. Sasha began to move, he turned round and saw that she had raised herself a little and was looking at him with her big, dark eyes. Whether Sasha had been scared by his muttering or whether she recalled recent events, or whether she was too weak—in any case she merely pulled up her legs, pulled the coat up to her chin and groaned.

Grigory Ivanovich immediately sat down by her head and stroking her hair began to talk about his recent thoughts.

"*Barin*, dearest, you had better leave me. I don't want anything, thank you very humbly," answered Sasha; she and Grigory Ivanovich both began to cry, she bitterly and he from the joy of pity.

The first days after she went back to the inn Sasha lived as though she had forgotten everything. Grigory Ivanovich visited her daily, asked whether he could help her and with a cigarette in his mouth sat on the porch. Sasha, passing near him, would tell him he had better go inside as there were fleas in

the yard: she was always busy at something, working in the yard, or in the house. One day he found Sasha in the garden, beside the fence. She was gazing out into the steppes, her face was calm and bore a look of importance, her eyes were gloomy, her head was covered with a black kerchief.

"I want to go away, I can't stand it any longer," she said.

Grigory Ivanovich then felt that there was no reason for his living any longer. He was so distraught and so low in spirits that the only thing he could say was:

"Sasha, if I'm not too disgusting to you, perhaps you might marry me."

Sasha had only a hazy memory of what Grigory Ivanovich told her that night and now she realized that he was unhappy, and she was sorry for him; he suddenly became as dear to her as a little child.

She now started running to the doctor every day. She washed the floors, windows and doors of his cottage, mended his underclothes, herself fixed the stove in the bathhouse that stood half-ruined on the high cliff above the river. She heated the bathhouse and told Grigory Ivanovich to take a good steam bath. When he returned thoroughly steamed, tired and happy, Sasha was awaiting him with the samovar—the house was clean, there was a smell of freshly-washed floors, of sage and of the wax candle that was burning in the corner.

Whenever he spoke of marriage, however, she shook her head.

"We don't need that, Grigory Ivanovich, it's sinful and wrong."

Then she saw that he slept badly, that he was suffering, that he shuddered when she accidentally touched him, and she agreed.

She cried till her head was fit to burst but she agreed: apparently you can't go against the customary ways of man. Father Vasily, satisfied with the way things had turned out, married them at the end of the summer. At the wedding he

drank three glasses of vodka and even danced: Grigory Ivanovich clapped his hands and Father Vasily stamped his feet, shouting: "Go round house, go round stove."

IV

The summer seemed to have ended satisfactorily with the two weddings. Grigory Ivanovich and Sasha stayed on in their little cottage, waiting until the zemstvo hospital was rebuilt.

Sasha let the inn and gave up all her time to her husband, trying to understand and please him and not to annoy him with her rustic appearance; although the village immediately dubbed her "Mrs. Doctor" she continued to wear her kerchief and dark calico dresses. Grigory Ivanovich understood this and did not insist on a change. He read aloud to her every day and tried not to hide a single thought or deed from Sasha, to be as one single person with her.

The young Prince and Princess Krasnopolsky traveled around Europe sending home postcards from different towns to the great astonishment of Volkov with whom geography was not a strong point; today, for example, a letter would come from Italy, tomorrow, another from France. "They jump round like fleas," he said to Kondraty who politely answered "Tch!"

After the grain had been gathered in, Alexander Vadimych set about redecorating the prince's house at Miloye. A gang of plasterers, paper hangers and joiners hammered in the high rooms, the whole place smelt of paste, lime and shavings. Volkov himself would go to Miloye in the mornings and shout around the place so loudly that the workers called him the "cannon-boss" and were not a bit afraid of him.

At the end of September when, beginning with the provincial horsefairs the whole region woke up, when there were evening parties, hunts and weddings, Alexander Vadimych expected the young couple to return and hurried the completion of the

work at Miloye. Suddenly the letters from abroad ceased. "Surely they haven't dashed off to America?" thought Volkov but a few days later he received a telegram: "Coming, Katya."

Alexander Vadimych began bustling about, selected the best trio of snow-white horses (this was to be a gift to the young couple on their arrival) and wavered for a long time: he was very anxious to go and meet them at the station himself but he refrained and gave the coachman very strict instructions, tapping him on the forehead with his finger as he did so:

"Listen to what I tell you; fly like the wind and as soon as you have brought the prince and princess home hurry back here. And don't forget to tell them that the horses are a present." No sooner had the horses disappeared behind the hill than Alexander Vadimych became greatly disturbed, fell into a gloomy mood and sat down by the window. For some reason he was sorry for his daughter, Katya: "I married her off in too much of a hurry. She was a fine girl, modest, motherless. . . . What the devil was I thinking of then? My God, my God, nothing has turned out as it should. . . . That's not the sort of husband she should have had. . . ."

The coachman returned in the evening riding a gelding from the prince's stable. He dismounted at the porch and came straight in to Alexander Vadimych whose head even began to shake from excitement.

"Well? Arrived safely?"

"Yes, Alexander Vadimych, safely, thank God."

"Were they in good spirits?"

"All right, everything, thank God. . . ."

"And how's the prince?"

"I sort of didn't see him. . . ."

"What d'you mean, didn't see him? Why don't you speak? . . . Speak, or I'll knock your head off."

"The prince, you see, didn't come. Our young lady came alone."

Alexander Vadimych merely opened his mouth wide. Kondraty came in with the candles. Volkov, sitting in his chair, turned his eyes towards him and said:

"There's been some trouble, Kondraty Ivanovich. . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Go over there at once and find out. . . . Oh, my God. I felt it in my heart. . . ."

V

Yekaterina Alexandrovna had actually come alone, without her husband. She was met by the steward and went immediately into the drawing room and removed her traveling coat, hat and veil. She stood at the window and looked out for a long time at the park, at the Volga below the house and the fields beyond the river. For a long, long time she stood staring out of the window. She sighed and then turned to the steward who had fastened his blue jacket as much as it would go to prevent his fat belly sticking out too much, and was waiting respectfully.

"The prince will be coming later," began Yekaterina Alexandrovna, frowning. "He's been delayed by business. You will give me an account of all household affairs and show me all the books. . . ."

"Do you wish to see the house first, madame, or the books?" asked the steward.

"Bring the books later," and she went round all the rooms asking where the prince's study was, which was the bedroom, where he liked most of all to sit. . . .

The ground-floor rooms were high and cold. Katyenka went upstairs to the prince's rooms but just glanced at them and ordered the servants to lock up all the rooms upstairs and down, except the dining room, till spring; for herself she selected the small drawing room with stained-glass windows and the piano and next to it a little room, all in white where her bed and

a washstand were placed beside a tiled stove, round like a tower....

When the steward with his squeaking boots had gone Katyinka returned to the drawing room and sat down at a table behind the columns, leaning on its mirrorlike surface (her pretty arms in sleeves that were tight-fitting to the elbows were reflected in it), leaned her cheek against her interclasped fingers and again looked out at the park, the river and the fields.

Her face had grown thinner, her abundant hair was darker and she wore it twisted round her head like a coronet; her dark traveling dress with lace at the neck was severely cut and warm, like that of a woman who would not permit herself a sudden movement or a dangerous thought if it would upset her tranquility.

In the garden outside leaves were wilting and falling. Between the dark cones of the fir trees the drooping, already partly leafless birches showed a tender yellow and the sky peeped through their sparse foliage. The old maple in the glade had spread its branches and was glowing all purple as though it were just ready to drop off into a gloomy sleep. The lindens were still green but the tall poplars were quite bare and their bronze leaves carpeted the paths and mown grass. As she looked out at the fading garden and at the blue river where a ferry was just crossing, Katyinka realized that this was the beginning of a long, a terribly long, period of tranquility.

She was firmly resolved not to recall the past three months - to lock them securely away and to arrange her life intelligently and severely.

Breathing in the scent of the fading garden that came with the wind through the half-open window, she felt a hot dampness on her cheek.

"No, I mustn't do that," she said. "What has been decided must be done."

She turned round rapidly, looking for her handkerchief, got up, took her handbag, got a handkerchief and wiped her

eyes, poured some perfume on to her fingers, daubed it on her temples and rang the bell. When the footman came Katyenka told him to fetch her writing case from her bag.

Twilight had set in and this was a time that Katyenka feared more than anything else. Standing with her back to the window she waited until the lights were lit. The footman returned with a red morocco writing case; he climbed on to a chair and one by one lit the candles in the chandelier over the table.

A warm light immediately fell on the plaster carving of the ceiling and on the white walls and drove the bluish shadows behind the columns, warming up the gilt on the scroll capitals.

Katyenka sat down at the big table, thought a little and then wrote:

"Alexei, I forgive you. I thought a lot on my way home and I have decided that you must live with me. that is essential to give me peace. We will be like brother and sister, like friends."

She read what she had written, tapped her heel on the parquet, lifted the rustling sheet of paper with the intention of tearing it up, changed her mind and put it into an envelope and sealed it.

Just then the high oak door at the end of the room began opening softly and a wrinkled shaven face appeared in the doorway.

"Kondraty!" exclaimed Katyenka.

With a sob he ran towards her and kissed her shoulder.

"Greetings, dearest friend," she began, taking the old man by the head and kissing him. "How's everybody at home? How's papa? . . ."

"Darling Katyushenka, we have longed so much to see you again, that's all we old people live for, we thought only of you."

"Did you? I thought so. Of course I should've gone straight to papa, but I came here. But I felt very bad, Kondraty."

"And where's the prince?" he asked in a whisper.

"I don't know, Kondraty, I don't know anything. I was a bit vexed."

She again took her handkerchief from her bag and burst out crying. Kondraty touched her hair and looked into her face.

"Kondraty, my husband has left me," said Katya.

"Good heavens!..."

When she had calmed down a little she told him everything that had happened. Kondraty did not speak for a long time, pressed his trembling lips together and then spoke, waving a threatening forefinger:

"So that's the sort he is! No, Katyusha, he won't get away with this."

Katyenka did not want to spend the night at Miloye and at about midnight she and Kondraty drove over to Volkovo. When they reached the dam Katyenka began to feel excited as she smelt the familiar odours of the ponds and the rookeries. The carriage lamps showed up the footbridge across the ditch, the corner of the barn by the porch (it seemed small and narrow). There was a light in the first two windows and Katya could distinguish her father's bowed head at one of them.

"Now don't you breathe a single word, understand?" she whispered hurriedly, pulling at Kondraty's sleeve.

VI

When Alexander Vadimych, holding his dressing gown round him, ran to the entrance hall straight to his daughter and asked: "Little girlie, joy of my heart, what's the matter?"—Katyenka lied to him and said that the prince had been detained in St. Petersburg on urgent business.

Volkov believed her—he was not the sort that would not believe, he did not understand cunning and did not ask for

details of the business that had detained the prince: it's other people's business anyway, if you start asking too many questions you get entangled like a bumblebee in a spider's web.

He immediately began calling Katyenka little princess and took her into the small dining room where a big samovar was sending steam up to the ceiling.

"You look well, by God, a thoroughbred, Katyerina," said Alexander Vadimych taking his daughter by the shoulders and turning her round. He poured tea for her himself and offered her all sorts of things to eat. Tears rose to Katyenka's eyes but she drove them back by screwing her eyes up tight.

"I was so miserable without you," said her father, "you know I've got out of the habit of living alone. . . . I don't go anywhere. Everybody is angry with me. And then there was another trouble: I bought a steam engine, we dragged it across the Kolyvanka River and it broke through the bridge. The funnel is still sticking out of the water. And how did you like your trip? I called you jumping fleas. And how's the prince? Oh, yes. Will you sleep in your old bed? I can see you're tired from traveling. You know, Katya, I'm very glad to see you."

After tea, Alexander Vadimych, chattering and fussing took his daughter to the old room of her girlhood. Katyenka was getting more and more miserable: she had cheered up on the way home but her father, his talk and everything else around her only saddened her. Had she become unaccustomed to it all or had she grown older? As she said good night to Alexander Vadimych at the door with the hangings she realized more than ever that she was alone and that there was nothing she could do about her loneliness.

No changes had been made in her room. Katyenka's heart beat fast when she went in and saw her dressing table, her Karelian armchair, her bed and even her slippers on the rug. But the former cosiness, the smell of perfumes or the freshness of spilled water—all were gone and the cold of a room that

had long been unoccupied chilled her shoulders when she removed her dress and sat on the bed to stare at the darkened window.

It seemed as though another Katyenka had lived here, a happy and innocent girl who had died and whom she was very sorry for. Her memories of Alexander Vadimych were also sorrowful—he wanted so to please her; he fussed about, talked of trifles, and now he was offended by her indifference to everything, because she had gone to bed immediately and had not kissed him good night; he was probably sitting in his study sighing.

Katyenka got up and thought of going to her father to tell him that she loved him a lot and needed a little tenderness herself. She shook her head, however, and crawled in between the cold sheets.

"It's a pity I haven't got a sister," she thought. "I would take her into bed with me and kiss her pretty hair and tell her that it's hard, very hard for women to live."

The following days passed in a quiet and even sadness. Katyenka wandered slowly about the house, listening with a smile to her father whom her presence made happier and who showed her the letters he was then sorting and his diaries (his latest fad); she sat on a bench in the garden, her head raised looking at a faded leaf that had got caught in a spider's web on its way to the ground and swayed there and could fall no farther. The trees looked like gold against the dark blue sky in the way they do in the clear days of an Indian summer.

Then she went back to Miloye. It was too difficult for her to hide the truth from her father. Time passed in endless monotony with nothing to disturb the even tenor of its way. The local landowners would have come visiting the young princess but they had been informed that Yekaterina Alexandrovna was sick.

The landowners were offended and Tsuryupa began stealthily spreading rumours.

VII

Katya was awaiting an answer from her husband and in order not to think, not to become too bored she went around the estate every day, dressed in a velvet coat trimmed with grey fur.

Autumn was far advanced. In the morning the frost lay on the yellow grass giving it a dove-grey appearance. The frost lay for a long time on the slopes of the roofs, on the rim of the well where icy water that smelt of silt was drawn from a great depth, on the balustrades of the balconies and on the leaves of the trees.

Every morning Katyenka went to the stables and the stable-hands gave lively answers to her questions and smiled at her as though she were a little girl. The steward, seeing Katya about the estate, bowed to her from a distance and busied himself around the barns clanking his keys loudly (Katyenka did not like the steward and he was offended because she never invited him to her table). She asked the shepherd about the sheep whether a wolf had not carried one off that night--and looked in at the farmyard, covered with cow dung. The cow girl, sitting on a stool, was milking a cow with the warm milk streaming with a clang into the bucket; she let go of the cow dugs and, wiping her mouth, bowed her head in greeting to the young mistress. Once the cow girl asked how old Katyenka was and when she was told she called her "miss" and "honey."

Near the hands' quarters eight girl day labourers were chopping cabbage in a short trough, their chopping knives clanging busily the whole day. Heads of cabbage lay on a tarpaulin and two dirty-faced boys, sitting beside it on their heels, were chewing the chilled cabbage roots with their sharp teeth.

When the girls saw the mistress they turned their rosy faces towards her and began whispering together. Katyenka looked into the trough, smelt the sweet garlicky odour of the cabbage,

asked whether they had chopped much cabbage and smiling at the healthy-looking girls asked:

"Aren't any of you married yet?"

"There's Froska there who would be celebrating but all the boys run away from her cross-eyes, they're afraid she won't recognize her husband in the dark."

They all laughed heartily at plain Froska's expense. Katyenka thought sadly, as she walked away, that she would again have to spend the day alone.

At home she folded her hands behind her back and walked up and down the room or sat down by the stove and leaned her back and her head against the warm tiles looking through the window at the sky where clouds, heavy with snow, were drifting down from the north.

The snow came suddenly—in the morning it hid the grass, covered the garden seats and lay in cushions on the stumps of felled trees. The trees were white with snow. A cool, white, opal light poured into the high rooms. The stoves were heated. Runners were spread on the floor and there were the marks left by felt boots around the entrance.

When Katyenka awoke that morning she was so pleased with the clean white light, with the snow on the window sills and the fires burning in the stoves that she hurriedly donned her fur coat and felt boots and ran through the glass door into the garden.

The frost nipped her cheeks. Her boots left footprints in the snow that went deep down to the frozen grass. Katyenka laughed as she picked up handfuls of snow.

"It's good, oh Lord, it's wonderful!"

It was as though this snow, these jolly white trees peeping up motionless from behind the hill with their sunlit snow-capped tops, had given her the feeling that her sorrow would pass.

She did as she used to do at home in Volkovo, she tucked her coat and skirt tightly round her legs and slid down the snowy slope to the river. Laughing she turned to walk up the slope again but she was out of breath and walked down to the

water. Near the banks the river was frozen but out in midstream the leaden grey oily water foamed and gurgled carrying little balls of snow on its surface. Katyenka shivered from the cold and sat down under the trees with her face to the river. Somewhere up above her a dog barked and a footman called her to come to breakfast.

A hare, hearing the barking of the dog, jumped out from behind a nearby bush. Katyenka laughed again as she watched the dog, dashing down the slope like a snowball, give chase to the hare.

The whole day was a pleasant one for Katyenka and she waited, expecting her father to come now that the snow would bear a sleigh; he did not come, however, and she had to spend the evening alone, in an armchair beside the stove.

Either she had become too excited in the frost or the stoves had been overheated, for Katyenka discovered that she had a slight chill, shivers were running up and down her back and her cheeks were flaming. . . . She sank back deep into the armchair, crossed her legs and smiled as she gazed at the fire. . . . She thought of Alexei Petrovich when for the first time—it had been in Moscow—he had kissed her, insistent and pale, speaking words that she had no right to think of at this time of loneliness.

Katyenka tried to pull herself together, she wanted to get up, but she was so exhausted that she could not move—it seemed as though somebody was flashing pictures before her eyes her mind was filled with memories, with exciting scents, with every thing that her strict resignation had long held back. She closed her eyes tightly, laid her hands on her breast and memories seared and blinded her like a blizzard.

VIII

Winter had come into its own. Blizzards drove along the frozen river, howled through the bare elderbushes, whirled into the fields tearing up the snow and piling up drifts under the

frozen bushes, against haystacks in the steppes and against the body of the fallen traveler.

That winter Grigory Ivanovich read a lot—he had ordered books and magazines from St. Petersburg. He began the magazines by glancing through the articles, marked some of the lines with a pencil, thought over them for a long time and then read the feature stories to Sasha, seeking all the time for an answer to the question: how should one live?

Having made a sacrifice in the summer, Grigory Ivanovich had calmed down, but not for long: the sacrifice did not seem to have been a real one, it was more like a pleasure, and he wanted to accomplish a lot.

Times were unsettled, not like it had been formerly. Some of the articles that found their way into the newspapers were so boldly challenging that they made you catch your breath—his undergraduate years in Kazan seemed child's play compared to this. One article in a newspaper (in the provinces the paper came only to subscribers but that number sold for fifty rubles in St. Petersburg) seemed to open Grigory Ivanovich's eyes; he saw that there was a path to follow for a man with a conscience. And what a path! One on which he might have to lay down his life.

There were many nights when Sasha did not get a chance to sleep as she listened to Grigory Ivanovich who ran up and down the room trying to prove to her how a man should live. A shadow darted along the wall following him and Sasha would stare in fear as she listened to her husband. The doctor was very excited and had decided to begin a new life without any procrastination, but it all came to a bad end very unexpectedly.

On a cold night when a blizzard was blowing, Grigory Ivanovich was sitting at his table reading. Sasha was busy behind the partition and by the rattle of the crockery the doctor knew that tea would soon be ready.

The blizzard howled around the corner of the house and it

sounded as though the devil, his paws drawn up under him, were sitting on the roof grumbling at the cold.

"An awful blizzard, good heavens, somebody might get snowed under in the steppes," said Sasha from the other room.

The doctor, shading the lamp with his hand, looked at the frosted windowpane. The needlelike icicles and the frost fronds on the glass were occasionally lit up with a blue light from the moon that dived and leaped at a tremendous height amongst the black clouds from which the snow was falling...

"Do you know," began Grigory Ivanovich, "I keep thinking that in St. Petersburg, at a table somewhere, a clever and honest man is sitting and writing and I am here, two thousand versts away, assimilating his thought—astounding! What right have I to remain inactive!"

"Who's that?" asked Sasha. "Is it somebody from here or somebody you met somewhere?"

"Oh, you don't understand," answered the doctor, placing his hands on the book. "I tell you, Sasha, I'm not living the proper way, too comfortable and tranquil: an unconscionable life! Do you understand that?... It can't go on. I have no right to live in comfort when people there are dying for me. I must 'raise my head'—I've just read about that here.... And it is your duty not to hold me back in safety but to encourage and inflame me. That's what real women do...."

Grigory Ivanovich's voice even trembled from the excitement.... Sasha came out from behind the partition, stood near her husband's chair, folded her arms, lowered her eyes and said softly:

"Forgive me, Grigory Ivanovich...."

He should have laughed then and explained things to Sasha—she would have understood everything. He did not do so, however, and angry with himself for his own weakness, blamed his wife who, as he now believed, had created this "philistine comfort."

Just at that moment, sleigh bells, caught by the wind, tinkled outside the cottage, the snow crunched and they could hear the breathing of nearby horses.

"Surely you won't go out in this weather, Grigory Ivanovich? It's so bad, you'll get snowed under," said Sasha, going back into the other room.

"Not much pleasure in it," he muttered. "One of the land-owners got a bellyache." He tossed back his hair, slammed the hook to, got up, and pushing with his knee at the cost of considerable trouble, opened the outer door that was swollen and stuck tight.

The great clouds of steam that came swirling into the outer room prevented him from seeing anything but somebody had already entered the house. Grigory Ivanovich stared, stepped back and gasped: Katya was standing in the doorway.

Her black fur coat was covered with snow, her face showed red from under her hood, her eyelashes were white. She pushed the door to, pulled off her mittens, stamped her feet and said:

"You didn't expect me? I almost got lost. I was on my way to Papa and the snow is piled up so that you can't get across the bridges. I saw the light and turned in here. May I come in?"

She was unfastening the big buttons of her coat. Grigory Ivanovich recovered himself, took her coat from her—it was warm inside and smelt of fur and perfume, and he took her hood.

Katyenka's hair had become disarranged under the hood, she put it in order and sat down at the table.

"Where's Sasha?" she asked.

"In there," answered Grigory Ivanovich, nodding towards the partition. "We have been reading and were just going to have some tea." He glanced sideways at Yekaterina Alexandrovna as though he were ready to hide or run away.

"Sasha, it's I. come on out," said Katyenka, arranging the lace on her dark dress; she smiled suddenly.

Grigory Ivanovich opened his mouth and drew breath with great difficulty.

At last Sasha came out, holding her hands under her black blouse; she bowed, her head only, slowly and with dignity. Katyenka put her arms round Sasha's neck and kissed her.

"Still the same beauty," she said. "How are you getting on? All right?"

"Thank you, everything is fine," answered Sasha slowly without raising her eyes.

Katyenka kissed her again but Sasha was as unresponsive as stone and Katya took her hands from her shoulders. Grigory Ivanovich looked at both women and frowned painfully, realizing how difficult this meeting was for Sasha. Although he frowned he nevertheless compared the two women: Sasha seemed vulgar and heavy while everything about Yekaterina Alexandrovna was graceful, her movements, her fine hair, piled high, her voice like music, her dress soft and delightful. . . .

Grigory Ivanovich was indignant that such thoughts should come to him but no matter how hard he tried to look indifferent his eyes saw of their own accord things which they should not have seen and which it was sinful to see—the twists of hair, the upturned corner of the mouth, the folds of the dress on her breast rising and falling as she breathed.

At last one of the tendons under his knee began trembling like a mouse. It was so objectionable that he spoke in rough tones.

"Well, is the samovar ready at last?"

Sasha turned round slowly and went out of the room. They could hear her blowing into the samovar and the rattling of the samovar chimney as she removed it. There was a faint smell of smoke. Katyenka turned over the pages of the magazine, then threw it down, leaned on the table and said:

"I wrote you twice asking you to come—I was not well. Why didn't you come?"

"I couldn't," answered Grigory Ivanovich.

Sasha brought in the samovar and wiped the dishes, calm and concentrated but without raising her eyes.

"I spend all my days alone. I listen to the wind howling. . . . I think and think. . . . Oh, God, I haven't done so much thinking in all my life! And here, in your house, even the wind is cosy. . . . I like your place. . . . I even envy you." Katyenka suddenly laughed and looked Grigory Ivanovich straight in the eyes— he drew his head into his shoulders but was unable to tear himself away from her cold, strange, grey eyes. "And do you remember?" she began again, "how funny you cut your hair that time? Afterwards Kondraty told me how he cut your queue off with his scissors."

Grigory Ivanovich could feel that his face was flushed and that he was lost. At last, turning to the door, Sasha said:

"Grigory Ivanovich, go out and fetch the milk, the end jug— I'm in my stockinged feet." Turning to Katyenka she said: "We have two cows, a piebald and a red one, and a bullock. Quite a farm."

"You see, you understand," said the doctor's eyes and he immediately went out. He fumbled about the shelf in the cold outside room; he knew where the jugs stood, but he deliberately wanted some rubbish or other to fall down, but nothing did, so he took the jug and standing there in the darkness, whispered:

"Oh, hell!" and he wanted to smash the confounded pot, but he only frowned and clicked his tongue, he knew that the evil had already been done and that the misfortune (or good fortune?) had arrived.

"Is this the pot you want?" he asked roughly, placing the jug in front of Sasha and sitting down in the shadows.

Coming in from outside, the room smelt strongly of perfume. Grigory Ivanovich got the idea that this was not perfume, but the scent of Katyenka's hair, hands and clothes.

She drank her tea slowly and her lips were red, very red. Sasha hid behind the samovar and busied herself wiping cups

It occurred to Grigory Ivanovich that Sasha had grown fat, stubborn and bad tempered.

"And she'll get still fatter, yet. Thinks I'm her property. Thinks she did me a great honour. Sits there and hates her and I have to carry her jugs! It's foul, rotten.... And me, I'm nothing but a scoundrel, anyway!"

Katyenka asked him whether he had much work. Grigory Ivanovich, looking to the side, away from her, answered that he had.

"I travel and travel over the whole district. I no longer resemble a human being. Ours is no princely life, we live up to our knees in dung. You don't get fat on it."

At that moment a saucer slipped out of Sasha's hands and was smashed. Katyenka gasped.

"Oh, what a pity," she said with so much feigned sympathy that Grigory Ivanovich snorted and suddenly exclaimed in a trembling voice:

"You've never seen poverty, have you? There it is, look at it!"

"What are you saying?" whispered Sasha, raising frightened eyes.

Yekaterina Alexandrovna's spoon trembled in her hand and rattled against the side of her glass. Grigory Ivanovich ran over to the stove and then turned round, his lips pressed tight.

"Squalor, as much as you want of it, more, even, than is necessary, but the spirit is still alive, that's something you can't crush. Yes, I don't want to offend you, Yekaterina Alexandrovna, but it hurts me to think that you have come to make fun of us. Let me tell you that there's nothing to laugh at. There is something else more important in our life than those pots there. And we live as though we were burning in a furnace. We live for ideas! Compared with them all this squalor is a trifle. I can afford to ignore it even if my own personal life is a failure. It has failed and here I am, one more fighter!"

Grigory Ivanovich said much more of the same sort. Katyen-

ka listened with her head bowed. At last, when he sat down suddenly on the bench, as though he himself were trying to make sense of his tangled words, Yekaterina Alexandrovna rose up from the table.

"You did not understand me," she said. "I live quite alone, I have nobody to speak a word to. Today I thought of you and Sasha, you seemed to be close to me and I came to make friends with you. Apparently nothing has come of it. Good-bye, my friends. It was not to be."

She put on her fur coat, slowly fastened the buttons, pulled on her fluffy white mittens, smiled sadly, bade them farewell again and went out.

Grigory Ivanovich was unable to utter a single word—everything that he had just said seemed to have flown out of his head like a whirlwind. Sasha, again folding her arms under her blouse, said to him softly:

"Anyway, there was no need to insult a guest, Grigory Ivanovich."

Then, just as he was, in his black shirt and hatless, he ran out into the yard.

The moon had finished its mad drive across the heavens and was now floating slowly in the frosty heights, round and clear. The three greys harnessed to the sleigh, were rattling their harness bells. The bluish snow was piled up in a steep drift beside the porch. Sinking into it up to his knees Grigory Ivanovich ran to Katyenka who turned round to him as she stood near the sleigh.

"Yekaterina Alexandrovna, I did not wish to offend you. . . . Oh, Lord, please understand me."

"I understand you," she raised her eyes and looked at the moon.

"Yekaterina Ivanovna, may I see you home?"

"Yes."

Grigory Ivanovich ran back into the house, and threw on his sheepskin coat,

"I want to see Yekaterina Alexandrovna home," he muttered fearfully and hurriedly, "I can't let her go alone especially as I have offended her. I'll be back late, possibly not till tomorrow morning," and he hesitated standing in the doorway. Sasha did not answer him but gathered up the tea things.

"Why don't you answer?" he asked. "Don't you want me to take her home?"

"As you will, Grigory Ivanovich, do as you think best."

"What has it to do with what I will," he came back from the door and his voice trembled. "I can't stand such answers. . . . Can't I even see her home if I want to?"

"What answers of mine make you so angry, Grigory Ivanovich?"

There and then he sat down on the bench and pressed his clenched fists to his temples.

"Intolerable!"

The harness bells tinkled outside as Katyinka got into the sleigh: Grigory Ivanovich jumped up and spoke in a voice of despair.

"For Christ's sake don't be so angry, I can't leave you like that."

"Never mind, I'll bear it," answered Sasha and went behind the partition.

"Oh, to hell with it!" he grunted. "I won't go!" And he ran out through the gates.

The horses were already moving.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" shouted Grigory Ivanovich, running after the wide back of the sleigh and stumbling through the deep snow.

IX

The moon shone through the frosted window of the sleigh and showed up the dreary snow-covered plain that stretched away and merged into the sky. The sleigh runners creaked

monotonous bells clanked like glass. Whenever the sleigh turned a bend Katyenka's finely chiseled face appeared out of the darkness in its frame of grey fur and flashes of moonlight played in her eyes.

Grigory Ivanovich looked at her and felt that he had dragged through the whole of his life for the sake of this moment. Now—he wanted nothing better than to stare at that bewitching face and to breathe the penetrating scents of the snow, perfume and warm furs.

"You know that my husband has left me?" said Yekaterina Alexandrovna, appearing in the bluish light.

Grigory Ivanovich started, thought that he had to answer that and suddenly, as though he had only been awaiting a signal, he began talking in a soft but entirely new and particular sort of voice which, however, he felt was his true voice; he told her what he had seen in the summer, how the clouds had risen from the river and drifted away over the forest, how his heart had been filled with love and how he had seen Katyenka approaching the bank in a boat and had realized that his love was for her. He told her about the bees circling over the grass and that his love had been so great and so fine that it seemed impossible that a man could bear such love, he had wanted to give it up to the sky, to the earth, to people.

"And what about Sasha?" Katyenka suddenly asked softly. Her face looked so strange at that moment, such a tormenting beauty, that Grigory Ivanovich groaned and fell back into the depths of the sleigh. Katyenka stroked his shoulder. He seized her hand and pressed his lips to the soft perfumed mitten.

"I love you," he muttered. "Let me die for you. . ."

He held her by the hand repeating those words in a dull voice and when the sleigh bounced over the ruts he seemed to be bowing to her. His face was troubled and not at all handsome.

Katyenka was filled with melancholy. At first she felt like making fun of Grigory Ivanovich, to tell him that she had not

been on her way to her father's that day but that she had come to him, she had come deliberately because of her bad temper and boredom, to torment him. That he seemed rather ridiculous, that his love, like those bows, was comical, and indeed, the only thing to do for such a love was to die. She did not, however, say any of this. She wanted to cry long and bitterly.

"Look at me. . . . Love me for just one minute," breathed Grigory Ivanovich.

Then Katyenka pulled her hand away from him. He did not resist, he only dropped down to her feet and rested his face on her knees. Her gloom and depression grew still deeper from this action.

Neither of them noticed that the sleigh had begun to careen over to one side: it turned off the road and rushed downhill. The coachman was unable to hold the young horses on the road and in their mad sideward rush they raced straight downhill on to the ice of the river.

The horses, churning up the snow and ploughing breast-high through the drifts, reached the river. The ice cracked, the sleigh swayed and sank down and the black water swirled into it.

Katyenka screamed. Grigory Ivanovich hurriedly threw open the right-hand door that was not under water. Between the thin ice floes, the horses threshed about in the running water, which glittered in the moonlight. The shaft horse held on to the ice with its forefeet—it suddenly neighed, a long, complaining note. The left trace horse grunted, only its muzzle was visible above the water. The right trace horse was being pulled away by the current

"We're drowning!" screamed the coachman from his box.

In the darkness Grigory Ivanovich seized Katyenka like a precious treasure, pushed her out of the sleigh, saying: "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. . . ." She caught hold of the framework of the hood, the sleigh careened over dangerously and Grigory Ivanovich was in the water up to his waist.

THE RETURN

I

Alexei Petrovich was traveling second class on a fast steamer from Yaroslavl and had lain for several days in his cabin without going out, not from any sort of indisposition but simply because he had no inclination to move and talk—he just drank and slept.

In the pocket of his crumpled jacket were his last hundred rubles, wrapped up in newspaper. Alexei Petrovich pretended that he did not know himself why he had boarded the steamer: he was like a sick dog with the fur hanging from his coat in tufts, so dirty, foul and miserable was it all.

After a year of riotous living Alexei Petrovich had descended to the lowest depths—nothing was left for him but death in a doss house and he now felt some sort of satisfaction, even a pleasant sort of thrill: his conscience did not bother him, he did not remember anything, and there was, indeed, no time for memories. When he awoke in his cabin, he cleared his throat, drank some vodka and sat down at the table by the mirror, yawned or played patience, until he again fell into a drunken sleep....

Before their marriage, when he had declared his intentions to Katyenka, seated on a garden seat, he had said that if she had wanted to marry him he would not have married her. It was then that Katyenka realized that he needed a "sacrifice." Alexei Petrovich really did need a "sacrifice," but one of a special kind (this she did not quite realize herself): it had to be living, warm, eternal. There are sacrifices that are final and irrevocable, when a person gives himself up entirely, disappears completely, and the memory of it worries the conscience and you feel unworthy. There are sacrifices that are fiery, joyful, instantaneous and memories of them make you sorry they cannot be repeated. Alexei Petrovich was a man who could live in, only

one way: if there was a loving woman hovering near him, a woman with a tormented heart, without any will power, who was always ready to give up her whole self for a kind word. He had to feel a constant, gentle reproach, a sweet burden, a sorrow at his inability to give her all the happiness that she deserved, to be able to plunge head first into that melancholy of love, to drink deeply of it as of a bitter, enchanting, unholy drink.

Such had been his relations with Sasha. When her calm sacrifice developed into the irrevocable sacrifice he was filled with horror and Katya seemed to be his only salvation. She was loving, tender and beautiful. The prince assumed that their alliance would be like a sad backwater in autumn—sorrowful, the last refuge on this earth.

After she slapped his face rage and passion were aroused in him: that slap reminded him of his past, with the only difference that here he was the master, he was the arbiter of fate.

During the first days of their honeymoon Alexei Petrovich seemed to fear that Katyenka would come to herself and would realize the full horror of their alliance, and he was polite to the point of insolence and very considerate. But she, little as she herself expected it, when she became a woman, suddenly and ardently fell in love with her husband, just as though she had emerged into a blazing light out of the gloom. It was a seething recognition of herself, the fiery heat of her blood at boiling point. In the face of this emotion the whole past died out, was burned up—it was not worth remembering.

Katyenka pulled her husband into the whirlpool of a woman's first love. Equally suddenly, Alexei Petrovich dropped into days of forgetfulness, of exciting joy, of happy cares for sweet trivialities. It seemed that a second life had begun when he saw only Katyenka's eyes filled with an adoration that almost amounted to madness, for him there was neither past nor future, nothing but that excited, fathomless feminine look.

This happiness that made his head whirl was not of long duration. Alexei Petrovich began to realize that he could not stand the tension and he lost his head. The first quarrel came. Katyenka was hurt and ashamed when her love was treated coldly, almost with ridicule. She felt how far removed she was from her husband—they were like two strangers. It happened in the evening, in an old hotel in Venice. Alexei Petrovich stood at the window looking out on to a narrow canal that glowed crimson in the rainy sunset. Katyenka was lying on a sofa crying.

"For God's sake, stop it, Katyusha, no great misfortune has occurred," said Alexei Petrovich softly. "You wanted to kiss me and I was distraught. That's all. I was thinking that, after all, we've seen nothing properly in Venice but the restaurants. Don't you agree? I think it's just the evening dusk that has given you the blues. Or perhaps we're tired...."

That all was quite true and there was nothing to cry about.

But Katyenka herself did not know why she was so sad, it was as though the sun had disappeared forever beyond the distant rim of the sea and that all her life would now be hopeless and gloomy.

On the water below a black gondola slid noiselessly by. The prince, leaning on the window sill, watched the narrow bows of the boat cutting into the reddish waters. The lady sitting in the gondola lowered her lorgnette and raised her face as she turned to speak to the gondolier. Alexei Petrovich recognized Mordvinskaya.

He staggered back from the window, and looked at Katya. She was now sitting with her head bowed. The handkerchief on her knees gleamed white in the dusk. Alexei Petrovich felt an incisive pity for this pure, sweet, ununderstanding young woman. He dropped to his knees beside the sofa, took her hand and pressed it to his lips, but the hand was unresponsive and his lips were cold. It was becoming clear to him that he

did not love her but the other, and that no sacrifice could drown that love.

The next day the Krasnopolskys left for Rome and then went on to Genoa, Nice and Paris.

Alexei Petrovich could not have said for certain whether it was Mordvinskaya who had slipped past him like a ghost in the black gondola, or whether it was a resemblance that had deceived him. But whatever it was, the door to the secret chamber of his heart had been opened, a door that had been kept tightly shut since the night when Anna Semyonovna had inveigled him into the cobweb of her loving tenderness and had poisoned him with her kisses. He now realized that he had been deceiving himself all the time and the deception that had been so skilfully built up had collapsed at one glimpse of that woman; that he would forgive and forget everything, even the whiplash across his eyes, for a meeting with Mordvinskaya; that he had neither will nor pride, nothing but a tortured heart that was at any moment ready to burn up with the deadly flames of love.

Suddenly he had ceased to care whether Katyenka left him or whether she would suffer to the end of her days by his side, or, like Sasha, whether she would make the silent sacrifice. She was silent, sad, but still did not dare ask why he had so suddenly changed.

In Paris, Alexei Petrovich sometimes left Katyenka alone at the hotel for a whole day. She would sit at the window and wait. Below her, on the Place de l'Opere, the traffic streams intersected, people ran across the square and she could hear motor horns, whistles, chatter and the sound of wheels. Only a short distance divided her from all that bustle and this made her loneliness and her mortification all the more acute.

Sometimes Alexei Petrovich came home very late. Katyenka looked sorrowfully at his gaunt face with his tormented and apparently unseeing eyes. "I don't love, I don't love, it doesn't matter, let him go to the dogs," she repeated, wringing her

hands. The prince would ask her to forgive him, explaining that he had wandered about the town the whole day but his words were confused, jumbled and incomprehensible. . . . Then he would get into bed, stretch out his arms above the blankets and pretend to go to sleep.

In all this mix-up there was only one thing Katyenka could grasp—that her husband was persistently trying to meet somebody, that he went to restaurants, theatres, taverns, shops, sat in crowded cafés and wandered about the boulevards. Katyenka tried to find out whom he was looking for, begged, threatened and wept, but the prince maintained his silence. Early one morning, when she glanced at his face, green in the morning light, with its deep-sunken, dull eyes, Katyenka sat on the bed, seized her head in her hands and said:

“I don’t understand, I don’t understand anything. . . . It’s all some sort of madness. . . . Lies, lies, lies! . . .”

“Yes, madness and lies, Katya. . . .”

Katyenka could not bear up any longer, her pride was broken. She jumped out of bed and ran barefoot to the window, shouting that if he left her alone in that room again she would throw herself out into the street and under a carriage. Her despair was so profound and so unexpected that Alexei Petrovich seemed to regain his senses, began to soothe Katyenka and said reluctantly that it was time for them to go home, back to Russia.

All this had happened because, on their arrival in Paris, Alexei Petrovich had gone to the embassy and there they had told him that Mordvinskaya was in Paris and alone, but that her address was not known. Then he began to search for Anna Semyonovna all over the town and actually saw her once or twice from a distance, but could not get close to her: she was with a tall young man, apparently the owner of a racing stable.

During the past week Alexei Petrovich had not met her anywhere: she had probably gone south, to Biarritz or Nice where the season had already begun.

In St. Petersburg autumn had already set in. Heavy wet clouds hung over the city. There was a smell of iron in the air. Pedestrians, busy and ill-tempered, with faces drawn from neurasthenia, did not even open their umbrellas, so accustomed were they to the dampness: let it pour.

On a day such as this the Krasnopolskys were driving along Morskaya on their way from the Warsaw Station to the hotel. Katyenka did not want to stop but Alexei Petrovich referred to some business and the exhausting, monotonous days began. It poured with rain, a yellow electric light burned in the hotel room the whole day, the prince went out for short periods and spent the rest of the time on the sofa, he was either silent or he got irritated over trifles or he tried to persuade Katyenka to visit relatives which she flatly refused to do. Then Alexei Petrovich went out one morning and did not return that day, nor the night nor the next day.

This is what happened. When he left the hotel in the morning Alexei Petrovich hired a cab and drove along the Shpalernaya as usual. When he drew near to the Mordvinskys' house he shut his eyes in his excitement: windows that had been whitened with chalk the day before had now been cleaned, the blinds had been raised and within the room several electric lights were burning. Alexei Petrovich paid off the cab at the corner of the street and returned on foot to the house. His heart was beating so wildly that he had to press his hand against it. He rang, entered the house and gave the footman his card. What would happen next, whether the husband or she herself would come out and what he would do in either case, was something the prince had not thought about.

The footman did not return for a long time. "The scoundrel, he's deliberately keeping me waiting," thought the prince. The footman appeared at the far end of the hall and from there looked at the prince,—impertinently, of course, and then disappeared. The blood rushed to Alexei Petrovich's head, he took a woman's black glove from the hall-stand under the mirror

and tore it in two. The footman appeared again with a brightly coloured feather duster, flicking away the dust as he walked. "Idiot!" shouted Alexei Petrovich and his voice resounded through the rooms. Somebody rang from inside the house, the footman disappeared, and the prince, slamming the front door with all his strength, ran out into the street.

There was a drizzle outside, clouds of mist hung down over the roofs and the damp air bit into him to the bones. Alexei Petrovich walked slowly along the pavement. He had foreseen everything except the footman with the feather duster.

"Now to forget myself as quickly as possible," he thought. "Only I must go somewhere that's as foul as possible." He now realized that this was the end. A footman with a feather duster and the dreary drizzle had put an end to eighteen months' terrible tension. This was to have been expected for he himself was small, feeble and insignificant and if it were to rain harder he would be washed from the pavement into the gutter and down the drain. Then he thought of Katya: "No, no, it's a long way to her. I must not. Somewhere in a pub."

A horrible woman in a wet boa who seemed to have had flour sprinkled on her, looked at him at the crossroads.

"What are you looking so serious about, dearie," she said in a hoarse voice and beckoned him to follow her.

The prince was nauseated but he immediately followed her.

The woman took him into a dowdy, evil smelling room. Alexei Petrovich, without removing his hat and coat, sat down at the uncovered table and looked at photos of some volunteers pinned up over the little torn red sofa. Through a partly-open door he could see another woman, half-undressed and with her hair hanging down. Noticing that the prince was looking at her she showed her decayed teeth and came out. Behind her appeared a big fellow in a crimson shirt, curly-headed and with bags under his eyes. An accordion was hanging from a strap across his shoulder. He bowed, shook his curls, placed a

foot in a patent-leather boot on a chair and ran his fingers over the keys.

"Yes, yes, sing," said the prince. "I'll pay you."

The woman with the loosened hair adjusted her canary-yellow dressing gown, snapped her fingers and began to sing—in an unexpected bass. The prince looked at her and took up the bottle that had appeared on the table, he knew not how. The bepowdered woman sat down beside him and began to look at him closely. Her watery eyes were lashless. She adjusted a lock of hair that had fallen and a bed bug crawled out from under the false hair as she replaced it.

The prince smiled in disgust and said: "Good"—and tossed off a full glass. The wine went to his head. The female bass sang: "I'll not wake the precious sleep of the young beauty with my fine song. . . ." The prince drank glass after glass of the sweetish, sickly wine. The sounds of the accordion seemed to draw farther and farther away. He wanted to get up in order, at last, to tear off that horrible wig full of bugs but he staggered and grabbing hold of the woman fell to the floor with her.

He awoke in an unknown room, not the one he had been in the day before, on an iron bedstead. His head ached tormentingly. He sat for a long time on the dirty mattress, recalled what had happened the day before and then staggered to the entrance hall. Bundles and boxes were piled up there and the portrait of some general stood on a chair. At the sound of the prince's footsteps a kitchen door opened, a puckered old woman stuck her head out, looked at him and disappeared again. The prince went out of the front door—it was a tall stone-built house and the one he had entered the day before had been a wooden house. "The devil alone knows what it's all about," he said and wandered for a long time on foot not finding strength enough either to call a cab or to recollect where he had to go. A lamplighter ran along ahead of him, lighting the lamps, one after another. Alexei Petrovich glanced at the yellow reflections under his feet, shook his head and in his misery leaned against

a damp wall. He felt in his pocket for a cigarette but there was neither cigarette case nor wallet in his pockets.

For the second time he remembered his wife. It was now that he noticed with surprise that he was so sullied, washed-out and unclean that it had become easy and sweet to think of her. Mordvinskaya seemed to have disappeared from his mind, her image had mingled with the mud of the street: everything connected with her must have died during that abominable night. This filled him with pleasure as though part of a tortuous journey was over, the most difficult and tormenting part had been overcome.

Bespattered with mud, soaking wet, but calm, Alexei Petrovich at last reached his hotel. The hall porter did not recognize him and the prince laughed—it meant that he had changed considerably during that night. When he reached the door of their room he removed his crushed silk hat, smoothed his hair with his hand and knocked.

Katyenka, wrapped in a white woolen shawl, was standing in the middle of the room. Her face was deadly pale, her eyes huge and dry.

"Where have you been?" she asked, glanced at him and turned away. "How awful!"

Without moving away from the door the prince said:

"Katya dear, I'm wet through, I can't sit down, I'll spoil everything you've got... But it's good, so good that it all happened like this." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and smiled a crooked smile. "I don't know whether I shall ever meet you again. But now I am saved, Katya."

"You're raving, you ought to go to bed," she said to him hastily.

"No, no, d'you think I'm drunk? I'll explain everything to you."

The prince, sighing, glanced round the room, looked at his muddy boots, and then, for a single instant, with tremendous tenderness, almost beseechingly, he looked Katya in the face,

lowered his eyes and began to relate everything in the proper order, beginning with the vision on the Venetian canal.

As Katya listened she walked over to the sofa and sat down—her legs would not support her. She understood everything right up to the present morning. But why Mordvinskaya's figure should have disappeared from the prince's mind was something she could not get clear. *This* alone was important to Alexei Petrovich now. He spoke about himself as though he were a new man, and yesterday's man, alien and hostile to him, had gone forever. All this seemed so obvious and so good to him and he felt so good and sure of himself that he could not understand why Katyenka was looking at him with such wrath on her face.

"Well, and have you thought about me at all?" she screamed at last, her face turning pink. "What am I to do now? How can I live with you?"

"You? Ah, yes...."

Actually the whole conversation had tended to show that Katyenka should, at this moment, make a burnt offering, surrender all her purity, all her miraculous feminine strength, and with it fill the prince's empty soul.

Alexei Petrovich realized this. It disgusted him more than ever before: what was he, indeed—a vampire? To live on the blood of others, to wax fat and then fall off.

"Katya, I am leaving you for ever. Later on you will understand everything, everything," he said and suddenly he fell into a terrible ecstasy and his voice broke. "My dear.... Remember, remember, come what may, I am always true, true, true to you unto death. Farewell."

Alexei Petrovich bowed low and left the room. That same day he gave his wife deeds for the whole value of his estate and full power of attorney, keeping only a few thousand rubles for himself. And that night he left for Moscow.

Alexei Petrovich had not a very clear idea what he was going to do in Moscow. He took a room in a cheap hotel and

for the first days he waited for that moment of terrible ecstasy to repeat itself and to spread into a long and miraculous joy. It gradually became certain, however, that no miracle was going to happen and that his past life that had disappeared for a moment, hung over his head ready to drop on him at any minute. Then came days of intolerable despondency, so incisive that he could see no way out but death. It was impossible to return to his wife. And the prince did not know where Katyenka was, what had happened to her after he left.

The despair increased. It was almost possible to say where the pain was—in the middle of his breast, under the central bone. The morning began with a sucking feeling in that place and by evening there was a weight of a millstone there. A glass of wine eased the pain. The prince started drinking brandy and then changed over to vodka. Then acquaintances appeared, strange enough to look at but all good people. The prince did not remember their names and just the same the faces became indistinct towards the end of the day, it was difficult for him to distinguish men from women and what did it matter, anyway? He often played cards and lost. Very little money remained in his possession.

In this hazy period—this forgetfulness of everything—there was one meeting, insignificant in itself, but one which made an impression on him. One day the prince was walking past Iverskaya Church. The church was like an island where passers-by rested for a moment, removed their caps, crossed themselves, and looked up at the dark face of the icon and the candles. The prince also stopped and tried to recall a prayer, but he could not remember a single one and only looked at the opalescent light and the flashes reflected from the gold icon frame. Just then a joyous voice behind him exclaimed: "Help the passer-by in the name of Christ, kind sir." The prince got out some small change and turned round. Before him stood a smiling young monk. his face was thin and pock-marked, his clear eyes a light blue. The prince looked into those eyes and

also smiled—it seemed to him that the monk knew something that was very important, something that he had to know....

"Here are some coppers," said the prince. "If you come to my place I'll give you a ruble."

The prince did not remember whether the monk came to see him or not but it seemed to him that those penetrating blue eyes had appeared for a moment amongst the card players, from behind the clouds of tobacco smoke.

Spring came. The prince wanted very much to think of Katyenka and in order not to do so he drank still more, drank without a pause. One day some boorish merchant fellow came to his hotel room, called himself a Volga man and said he had known the prince on his estate, enquired boisterously into Alexei Petrovich's affairs and, amongst other things, told him of the accident that had occurred opposite Miloye during the winter.

From this garbled story it was possible to get an idea of what had happened on the Volga on that winter night.

The sleigh had slid from the high bank into the water through a hole in the ice but had not turned over because the shaft horse had steadied it by getting its feet on the ice. The coachman had managed to cut the traces, one of the trace horses went under, the other had remained floundering in the water. The coachman had crawled along the shafts to the main sheet of ice, had grabbed the trace horse by the tail and helped it out of the water, mounted it and rode across the river to get help from Miloye.

Katyenka lay on top of the sleigh unconscious. Grigory Ivanovich standing up to his waist in the water (the coachman's box was also under water and he was probably afraid to climb on top of the sleigh) took hold of Katyenka, laid his head on her breast and gazed at her open eyes.

The snow had again begun to fall and the wind grew stronger. The loose snow began to blow along the river in clouds, the snow dust covered Katyenka's face like that of a corpse.

It was so horrible that Grigory Ivanovich raised his head and screamed. The shaft horse kicked and became weaker. The icy wind rocked the sleigh. Katyenka suddenly sat up, dropped her legs in their thin stockings over the side, looked round her, clapped her hands, seized Grigory Ivanovich's head and pressed it to her as though she feared to let him go. They sat like that in silence until workers with ropes and poles came galloping from Miloye. Hurrying to the ice hole they thought that the princess and the doctor had frozen to death but then they noticed that Yekaterina Alexandrovna turned her head slightly as she watched how they laid the poles. They threw ropes around the sleigh and dragged the faithful shaft horse onto the ice. Then something quite incomprehensible happened: when they were right at the edge of the main sheet of ice and the strong hands of the peasants had seized the princess, Grigory Ivanovich raised his head and opened his mouth and they all heard how his benumbed tongue moved to utter: "Never mind, don't touch me." He stretched out towards Katyenka, groaned and then fell, stiff and unbending, with a howl into the water to disappear like a stone under the ice.

The princess was wrapped up in sheepskins and taken to Miloye on a sled. The next day Alexander Vadimych came and took his daughter home with him.

The thing in this story that impressed Alexei Petrovich most was the death of Doctor Zabolkin. The more he thought about it, the clearer it became in his mind that this had not been a simple, accidental death but that it was the triumph of death, a sacrifice.

These ideas were all very disturbing. The prince was not even certain that Katyenka was still alive. It seemed senseless to remain in Moscow. He wrapped his last hundred rubles up in a piece of newspaper and went to Yaroslavl. There he boarded a steamer.

At one time he thought he would go to a village near Miloye and there find out something about Katya but he

changed his mind. All he had to do was to go past Miloye and just once breathe *that* air and then—to hell with it all, even death from D.T.'s.

II

Alexei Petrovich lay on his side in a single cabin whose walls were lined with tin and painted walnut colour. Near the door water ran into a washbasin. The blinds rattled. The sunlight, reflected in the water, came through the cracks in the blind and played in darting spots of light on the white ceiling.

On the table in front of the mirror stood a decanter of vodka, a plate and some tobacco in newspaper, on the floor was a portmanteau, almost empty, his coat was covering his legs.

In the summer heat the rhythmic pounding of the engines was lulling and it was easy to doze off on the soft bunk with the cool wind blowing through the window. Alexei Petrovich snored, his face was pink, like that of a drunkard. For some time he had eaten scarcely anything, he had only been drinking and toying with the tasteless food. When the alcohol began to burn too badly and his mouth was dry he frowned and reached for a bottle of kvass, sipped a little and pulling up his knees turned his face to the wall.

One gets a terrible appetite on the river and it seems that no sooner is lunch over than the bell goes for tea. "Something salty wouldn't be bad just now," thought the prince as he heard a knock at the door and half asleep said:

"Eh!"—and he opened his eyes.

Another knock came at the door.

"Get me a bottle, as cold as possible and something. . . ." said the prince in a rasping voice.

"Something salty—that's good," he thought. "With something slightly salted and some horse-radish I can drink."

The knocking at the door continued.

"What the devil do you want?" exclaimed Alexei Petrovich throwing his legs down from the bunk and pushing back the bolt.

The door was cautiously opened and the young monk with the queue and clerical cap looked in. He held the ends of his fingers in the sleeves of his robe.

"And you speak of the devil," began the monk. "Good afternoon!" He bowed low and then with a smile looked at the disorder in the cabin.

In a sort of scare the prince looked straight into the clean, blue eyes in his small pock-marked face. There was, indeed, an appearance of smallness about the whole mien of the monk not as if he had been knocked about, but he seemed so diminutive that there was not much of him to be knocked about.

"I've come for alms," continued the monk. "Our captain is a decent chap: you may ask for alms, he said, only don't steal. Why should I steal when people give me alms anyway? He said that you are a steady drunkard. But I can see you're not, are you? I feel I know you quite well."

He sat down beside Alexei Petrovich and put his hand on his knee; the prince moved aside, his puffed eyes goggling at the visitor.

"If it were not for worry a man might turn into a swine. It's true, old man, isn't it?" asked the monk suddenly.

Alexei Petrovich nodded his head, sighed deeply and answered:

"It is impossible to live worse than I do!" Then he stuttered and said angrily: "Listen, I didn't send for you, why do you intrude on me? Please go away, it's miserable enough even without you."

"Not for anything will I go," answered the monk. "I see you've reached the limit. No, I shan't leave you."

Alexei Petrovich shook his head violently, everything was mixed and hazy in his mind. Then he began again in a sorrowful voice.

"Surely you are not a hallucination? That would be bad. Listen, d'you drink vodka?"

"What for?"

Alexei Petrovich again raised his bleary eyes—the monk's face seemed to be floating round the cabin.

"Drink, or I'll kill you!" he screamed in a voice that was not his own. The monk merely continued smiling. The prince, exhausted, lay back and closed his eyes.

"My goodness, what the man has come to!" The monk paused, and then continued in an unexpectedly loud and sharp voice. "I'll give you a different beverage. My beverage will fill you, it will give you peace and restore you to life.... Listen to me.... Much was given unto you and you lost everything. You lost it, however, not in order to find something of indifferent value but to find the eternal. Get up, and wherever I tell you to go, there you will go."

"Don't shout, I'll do everything, it would be better if you'd go," thought the prince. The monk bent over Alexei Petrovich and stroked his head. The prince again screwed up his eyes.

"Come with me, old man," continued the monk. "I'm telling you the right thing—renounce this life. Soon we shall reach *Undory* and there you will leave the boat; you'll find me on shore. Think it over well and come. Understand?"

He stood quietly for a while and then apparently went out—the door latch rattled behind him.

Alexei Petrovich continued to lie there, collecting his thoughts with difficulty and wondering whether a man had really just been talking to him or whether he had been seeing things.

A long time passed in this way. The sunspots on the ceiling had long since disappeared, the cabin was getting dark, the lamp over the mirror glowed and then lit up by itself.

"Nonsense," said the prince. "Yesterday I also dreamed that some jockey in a yellow cap was here."

He stood up, looked at himself in the mirror and scarcely

able to drag his game leg went into the second-class dining room where he sat down in a corner without looking at anybody; in order not to hear the conversation he leaned his elbows on the table and put his hands over his ears. A waiter brought a cold decanter of vodka and some cold fish. The prince filled the sweating glass, added pepper, drank it off slowly and blowing out a blast of alcoholic breath, squinted at the fish.

Just then the steamer's whistle sounded and the boat began to turn. The curtains blew away from the windows and a voice at a neighbouring table said confidently:

"Undory. . ."

Alexei Petrovich immediately jumped up and asked softly: "Is it?" Then he went out on the dark deck.

As the steamer turned towards the jetty it churned up the black water. Close alongside, lit up by flood lights, a boat with two boys in it bobbed up and down: one of the boys was rowing, the other was playing a balalaika. The boat disappeared into the darkness.

The prince leaned against the railing and watched as they drew near the wharf, saw the sailors throw lines that rattled on the roof of the little office, watched a sailor and three ragamuffins fix the gangway, stevedores, wearing sacks on their heads like hoods ran up the gangway taking long steps.

Then people appeared out of the entrails of the vessel carrying bundles and boxes on their backs and thrusting their tickets into a sailor's hand.

Alexei Petrovich looked carefully round and suddenly started as he saw, amidst the peasants, the well-known eyes: they were, however, immediately hidden by a bale of wool.

The prince hurried below, mixed with the crowd, and, biting his lip, looked about impatiently.

From the jetty he hurried on to the bank where women were sitting before stalls lit by lanterns, shouting and thrusting out to the passers-by roast pork and little loaves.

On the sandy bank Alexei Petrovich got hopelessly entangled in the mass of sacks and luggage. All that he could remember was that he had to find somebody and ask what to do next. Once he thought he saw somebody very familiar bending over one of the stalls. Later, between the carts in the distance he thought he saw somebody beckoning to him.

"Egging me on," whispered Alexei Petrovich and bending low he ran by devious ways towards the carts.

At this moment the steamer's whistle blew, she cast off from the jetty and her lights went out.

III

"Hi, stop, wait for me!" shouted Alexei Petrovich to the departing steamer as he hobbled towards the gangway.

A thickset stevedore barred his way.

"Too late, master, the steamer's gone!"

A sailor, a market woman and a worried young peasant with a goatee came up to him. They surrounded the prince and all began asking where he was going and where he had come from. Had he left money on the steamer? Was he married? They made exclamations and shook their heads. The worried peasant fussed about as though it were he who had been left behind and one of the women, pushing her way under Alexei Petrovich's very nose, announced to the world in tones of pleased astonishment:

"Why, he's drunk!..."

Then everybody calmed down and began to show a friendly attitude towards Alexei Petrovich.

These aimless questions made the prince feel sick and pushing his way through the crowd he made off along the riverbank.

"I'll fall down somewhere and die and that will be a good thing," he thought. "Nobody needs me and I'll just go on as

long as my strength lasts. What a pity, oh, what a pity! What a way to end my life!"

At first Alexei Petrovich walked along the sandy bank towards which came the slow, invisible waves raised by the steamer. Soon, however, he came to a place where the sandy beach was intersected with deep channels over which he stumbled; he turned aside and made his way up to the bank to the fields above.

Only when he had with difficulty climbed the bank did he see the numerous stars above his head. The grass had already been mown and stacked. He stood still for a moment listening to the gurgling of a nearby quail and walked on faster—it was easier than it had been near the river where his feet sank into the sand.

"Where am I hurrying to as though I were being chased," he thought at last and suddenly realized that he had not once looked behind him. Seized by a sudden fear he cringed and slowly looked back over his shoulder.

Coming from behind the hill the dark figure of the monk in his pointed cap was crossing a field, grey in the starlight.

"Chasing me," thought Alexei Petrovich. "I must hide." Bending low to the ground he ran to the nearest stack and lay down in the hay, pulling his legs up under him and trying not to breathe. The wilting hay smelt of henbane and wild onions. Alexei Petrovich choked. The monk walked past him, his eyes seeming to blaze with a blue light.

"What a devil!" thought Alexei Petrovich in fear. "Now I'm lost! Will he see me? He's gone, thank God. . . . No, he's turning round. Nosing round like a wild beast. . . . Only I mustn't make any noise. . . . Perhaps I'm imagining things again: am I lying in the cabin and dreaming? . . . No, this is earth and this is hay. . . . And there are the stars. . . . You, dear stars, I have always loved you. . . . Lord, just now I believe in Thee."

Alexei Petrovich, his hand on his heart, turned his head round and groaned. Just then the monk came round the hay-

stack, sat down beside him and stroked his shoulder. The prince jumped up with a howl but there and then fell flat down again. His wide-open staring eyes were quite mad.

"Don't you be afraid," said the monk softly. "See what a state you're in. Why do you hide from me?"

"I won't again," said Alexei Petrovich with difficulty. "Now I see that it is you, from Iverskaya. I have done what you told me to..."

The monk smiled and it seemed to the prince that his moustaches opened up and his tongue shot in and out from under them like that of a lizard....

The prince would have jumped up and run away but the monk caught him and pulled him down to the haystack again.

"What a fool, by God you are. Well it can't be helped, we'll sleep a bit here on the grass. At first I meant to spend the night on some cart, we could have slept there.... Never mind, sleep away, old man, and I'll sing you a song."

He lay down in the hay alongside the prince and soon began to sing in a thin drawling voice:

*"I dozed off, mother mine
And dreamed a strange dream.
A white horse, mother mine,
Took me o'er the fields.
From my head fell my cap
And I was a corpse....
Ne'er would I escape
My horrible fate.
My mother she answered,
'Someone's horse goes by,
Bearing a white bride,
Dressed all in white,
Dressed all in white,
Is she my son's bride?'"*

IV

When the morning sun fell on his closed eyelids Alexei Petrovich awoke, raised himself on his hands and groaned, the whole of his body ached.

The monk was sitting on the hay and had spread a napkin in front of him on which lay a knife, a piece of bread and two onions.

His white teeth were biting into a third onion. On his pock-marked face, around his blue eyes and under his chewed moustaches, good-humoured wrinkles were playing.

"Has the fug worn off?" he asked. "Here, sip this, I saved it for you—but I won't give you any more, see!"

He took off his cap, pulled out of it a small phial containing a mouthful of warm vodka and gave it to Alexei Petrovich. Alexei Petrovich took the phial, recalling with difficulty what had happened. When he sipped the vodka his mind cleared and the blood began to flow faster through his veins. The prince got up, straightened his crumpled clothes, felt his neck where it had been chafed by his collar, took the collar off and threw it away.

"Now your spirit is easier," said the monk. "Take in some of the fresh air—look how yellow you are."

"Wait a minute," said Alexei Petrovich, "did you take me off the steamer?"

"Yes."

"Why? I was traveling on business."

"Rubbish, you have no business to do."

"Why did you take me away?"

"So that you can live. What else is there to do in summer? As to work—you're no worker, you're frail and lame. The winter's cold. In winter I try to get into the lock-up. I hide my passport, go to the station and say: 'I've lost my memory, have no relatives and nowhere to live.' They feed me and in

the spring I tell them who I am. Sometimes I have been beaten for that trick. That's how."

Alexei Petrovich listened attentively, drawing his brows together: the monk seemed unpleasant to him but there was clarity and strength in his words. "To hell with him," thought the prince. "And what next, if I send him to the devil? Back to a steamer? And where shall I go? And what for? Shall I go with him? It's funny, all the same: that I should suddenly take to tramping on the highways."

"Do you know whom you're talking to?" asked Alexei Petrovich, screwing up his eyes.

The monk winked slyly.

"I don't care if you're the Sultan of Turkey."

"The devil alone knows what nonsense this is," thought the prince. "I think I really will go on the road with him. Somewhere or other I'll peg out. Sultan of Turkey!" Then he said weakly:

"Tell me some more. How are we going on the tramp?"

And so they walked across the mown field towards a distant forest over which the white clouds were piled up high.

The clouds floated up slowly from behind the forest, rose up high above the fields casting cool shadows as they drifted lazily along and after crossing the whole curve of the sky, they banked up on the opposite edge of the earth. By the sun it was already past eight o'clock. In the hazy distance the whole surface of the blue river sparkled as it bent behind some chalk hills.

"Let them try and drive me away from here," said the monk turning first to the river and then to the forest. "They can't do it. I, like the squirrel, have the right to live wherever I wish. Do you know how squirrels live?"

He began telling him how squirrels live: he caught a grasshopper, and clasped his hands when a quail flew up from under his feet.

"That's for you, bobtail!"

Alexei Petrovich walked along a little behind his companion, his eyes screwed up; he had begun to imagine that soon they would come to the end of the earth and then they would go through the crystal air to the clouds and even higher, to where there was only wind and sun.

Soon he got tired of walking and, sitting down by the road, asked for something to eat.

"Wonderful, astounding," thought Alexei Petrovich lying flat on his back after he had eaten. "The sky is so blue. To go wandering really—people do wander about the world.... Everything that's unnecessary is blown away by the wind, yes, that's it, wind and clouds! And if I've had beating, so has the monk. Wait, though, what did he tell me at Iverskaya? Of course: that's where this wandering began, and this freedom and ease, and this whole world as clear as crystal. Astonishing, to remember nothing, to get used to nothing...."

In the evening they went into the forest and spent the night on a bed of straw under the stairs of a house belonging to a woman who only asked: "You're not thieves, are you?"

In the morning they again wandered across the fields. On either side waved fields of ripening rye—grasshoppers jumped into it from under their feet. Alexei Petrovich began to complain that his feet hurt. The monk took off the prince's boots and put them in his sack and bound his feet with woolen foot-cloth; it was easy to walk in the soft cloth. Alexei Petrovich did everything the monk told him to and limping along with a stick he thought that his whole life was now behind him, in that yellow cabin, and that here, before him, there was only the wind rustling the cornfield, columns of dust in the distance, a cart standing on a path between two fields and near it a faint wisp of smoke; beyond that hazy, quivering distance like a phantom sea, there lived, invisible from here, Katya.

"You know, I have a sister living here, her name's Katya," said the prince one day as they lay in the rye watching the golden ears waving in the sky above their heads.

"We'll visit her, we'll visit her," answered the monk. "The summer is long and man is like a cloud: it has been said—take up thy staff and go—in order not to get used to home, not to collect too many vices."

Alexei Petrovich, however, did not listen to the end of this reasoning—he only repeated to himself, "we'll go to her, we'll go to her"—and they would go and would go together.

The monk avoided the bigger villages where there was a policeman or police officer and the prince had to spend his nights in gullies where in the morning the sharp-winged swifts screamed overhead, or in the barn of an outlying farm or under a cart in the fields.

Alexei Petrovich was astonished at himself that the lice, mud and manure did not disgust him when he dropped down tired wherever he was, to awake happy and fresh, in the morning.

Everywhere the two tramps were accepted simply and nobody asked who they were, mostly people listened to the monk's stories, everybody understanding them in his own way: some people laughed and did not believe them; some were surprised—"this is a big world"; some simply shook their heads; and some woman would sigh although she herself did not know why. They called the prince "master" and were sorry for him and Alexei Petrovich was astonished at the amount of pity there was amongst the common people.

"There are plenty of us on the road like this," the monk said to him one day. "A man can live, he may have everything and he's only bored. I've been through that myself. I drank vodka, gallons of it. I would lie down on the floor with a bottle of vodka and a glass beside me, did not eat but only drank until my face turned black. I drank so much that I began to see things—a horse with horns and the head of a bird, quite naked, crawled out from under the bed. I wallowed like that for a long time. There were many more things like that. Another gets the blues so bad he takes a pistol and, bang!

blows off his brains—and that's the end of it. There are a lot of them do away with themselves. And there are some people who kill others out of sheer boredom, by God, it's true. Some day they are struck by the idea that it will always be like today: eat, drink and then die. They go in for debauchery like madmen, so that vice becomes second nature. When a man's in such a state why shouldn't he take a jab with a knife?... Very simple, if he wants to very much. There are others who are sorry for themselves and take to the road. I've taken many of them away myself. Last year I had a comrade, fellow like you. We walked and walked and then he up and confessed to murder."

"That's all true, all true enough," answered Alexei Petrovich (they were sitting under a stack of last year's straw, on the ridge of a hill, looking down at a village which was defined by a dark line of roofs, bird houses on poles and chimneys outlined against the sunset). "Now I think I understand why I am tramping. Perhaps I shall rid myself of uncleanness and then..." He was suddenly silent, turned away and his eyes filled with tears. In order to hide his excitement he finished by laughing softly: "But you've been wandering your whole life, you're a tramp, a real loafer."

"I regard such talk as nonsense," answered the monk. "Every man to his desires: there are some people who feel very happy sitting on a chair at home and there are others who ride through the town on a droshky with an accordion and are also very happy about it. There's nothing wrong with that but what's bad is when a man's head is all muddled. And perhaps I am also running away from my conscience? How do you know?"

On the tenth day they came back to the Volga again. After the conversation under the straw stack the monk did not sing any more but thought all the time, looking down at his feet. Alexei Petrovich also thought a lot, thought clearly and joyfully. It seemed that all his past had been an evil obsession, a sort of

spiritual delirium but now he was walking through the rye, in the sunshine and he loved as he had never loved before. . . .

In a village near the river, some thirty versts from Miloye, the monk was stopped by a policeman who also looked at the prince's passport, shook his head and said:

"All right, get along with you. We don't allow people with no employment here. . . . And you look out, you son-of-a-bitch, if I catch you again I'll lock you up. . . ."

Alexei Petrovich took his passport back, left the village and went into an oak grove on the riverbank. When night came the lights of a distant town shone like stars amongst the hills on the opposite bank.

The silence of the grove, the babbling and murmuring of the river and these flickering lights were well known and familiar. Lying on the grass in the darkness Alexei Petrovich wept, thinking:

"Darling Katya, my dear wife."

THE LAST CHAPTER

I

There was a great deal of traffic the next evening at Krasnov's Hotel where the town theatre gave its shows. Rain had wetted the asphalt sidewalk that was lit by an opaque street lamp. The people poured out of the doors like water out of a pipe and parted company on the sidewalk: some hurried home, some to restaurants, others stayed to look at the ladies and the young girls.

The landed gentry from the backwoods, elbowing their way through the crowd, kept saying "Pardon" as they jostled people; the local gentry stood politely aside and discussed the play; when the Marshal of the Nobility—a model of English upbringing—

ing combined with corpulence—came out, the porter, flinging back the doors, shouted loudly: "Carriage!"

Clerks standing on either side of the doorway looked curiously at the nobility: boys from the Gymnasium, wearing peaked caps after the Prussian fashion, crowded around the doors to get a better view of the young ladies and of the famous actress who had just been playing and in order to shout "encore."

The ladies, young and old, the wives of the clerks and merchants, wrapping themselves in their scarves and shawls, lifted their skirts and walked along the wet sidewalk.

At last Volkov and Katya appeared in the doorway.

"Krasnopol'skaya, Krasnopol'skaya," whispered the boys.

Mushchinkin, a clerk of small stature with enormous moustaches, scrambled right under Katya's feet, throwing his head back.

Katyenka really was unusually beautiful in her white coat and a little hat of violets. Her face of creamy white, like ivory, was stern, her lips were pressed haughtily together, her eyes were flaming—feverish and big.

The play had upset Katyenka for every word seemed to have been written about her past. Men from the boxes and stalls seemed to be deliberately staring at Krasnopol'skaya impudently and unconscionably and their glances tortured her.

The porter removed his cap and asked Volkov:

"Whom shall I call for, Your Excellency?"

"Call out Pyotr, brother, and yell as loud as you can."

The porter yelled across the whole square:

"Pyotr, carriage!"

As Katyenka followed her father into the carriage she caught her dress on the brass door handle and turned round. "Katya!" she heard a nearby voice say, she trembled, looked, passed her hand over her eyes, dropped into the deep seat of the carriage and the horses moved off.

The prince stood under the street lamp, hatless and in rags and tatters. Craning his neck he looked after the departing carriage and repeated that one word: "Katya! . . ."

"What're you standing here for, move along, move along," said a policeman.

The prince walked away from the lamp and immediately saw Tsurypa, who was looking at him through a lorgnette with unconcealed curiosity.

"Prince, what sort of a masquerade is this?" exclaimed Tsurypa, seizing the prince by the arm; he called for his brougham and no matter how the prince wriggled and muttered: "This has to be, leave me alone, I don't want to go," he forced him into the carriage and ordered the coachman to race downhill to catch the last ferry across the river.

Alexei Petrovich sat in silence, huddled up in the carriage; he answered questions briefly and did everything he could to prevent his teeth from chattering from an irrepressible tremor. The prince realized that Tsurypa and everybody else will, of course, very naturally and simply accomplish that which he would never be able to accomplish by himself.

"A silly play, I tell you," Volkov was saying to his daughter as they rocked along in the carriage. "I don't understand all the excitement about it, I even dozed off. And you, dearest, should not get so excited. You aren't tired, are you?"

"No, no, Papa," answered Katya, "only I don't want to spend the night in town, let's go straight home."

"You're right out of your mind, Katya! Aunt Olga is waiting with supper for us. How can we offend an old lady? Now, now, don't be worried, we'll take a bite and then we'll excuse ourselves on account of some business or other and go home. Ugh, Katyenka, I don't understand you young people of today. You've got some nonsense in your heads, you're flighty. People used to live more simply."

II

Not for nothing did Alexander Vadimych talk about flighty people or "vertige" as Aunt Olga said. Volkov had had a bad time of it that year. Katyenka had been ill all the winter, and she was just recovering when Kondraty had inadvertently mentioned that the doctor had been drowned in that ice hole and the "vertige" began in Katya's head. At one time Alexander Vadimych even wanted to leave the house altogether so unbearable had it all become.

At nights, Katyenka half dressed would go to her father's room: she trembled and glanced into dark corners, sat on the sofa, pulled her feet up under her and did not move, only stared at the candle. Then her face would be racked with spasms, she would have fits, clench her teeth and tell her father for the hundredth time the story of what had happened that night. In order to get his daughter's mind off those stories Alexander Vadimych thought it over and said to her:

"Grigory Ivanovich did not kill himself, and I don't think you're in any way to blame: it was fated that way, he was doomed."

"What are you saying?" asked Katyenka, all atremble. "Doomed? That means he was a victim?"

She suddenly calmed down. Once she spoke about the prince, simply and with a bitter smile on her lips. Alexander Vadimych cursed. She did not continue the conversation but apparently she thought a lot and had guessed something. When spring came Alexander Vadimych said one day:

"Katyusha, let's go to Aunt Olga, my dear."

Katyenka only shrugged her shoulders and said:

"All right..."

The catastrophe had affected Sasha differently. When Grigory Ivanovich went away with the princess she knew that he would not return. If he did come back he would be a stranger to

her. She also realized that her life with the doctor was all wrong and at that time in the garden she should not have consented but should have gone away. As she lay in her room she thought about how she would dress as an old woman and would wander along the roads begging alms in the name of Christ. Sasha felt that she would not live passionately as she did at present but in constant humility before heaven, before earth and before people.

At dawn a knock came at the door. Sasha, trembling like an aspen leaf, dressed and went to open it. Father Vasily came into the cottage, glanced round and said:

"He's drowned, Grigory Ivanovich, in the river."

Sasha bowed her head and muttered:

"God have mercy on us," crossed herself and sat down on the bench for her legs would not hold her.

Father Vasily told her everything he had learned from the Kolyvan peasant who had helped the Miloye workers get the princess out of the ice hole. Sasha listened calmly to the whole story and at the end said:

"He was not drowned, they drowned him. Here is some money, say a burial service for Grigory, the servant of our Lord."

Sasha lived on in the cottage through the whole winter, tended the cattle and kept everything clean and in good order: in the evenings she would sit at the table and look at the books Grigory Ivanovich had loved. When the wind howled round the roof with particular ferocity Sasha would raise her brows: it seemed to her that it was not the wind howling, but the unpenitent soul of Grigory Ivanovich.

When spring came she put on a black cloth kerchief, like a nun's, and left the village. And nobody has seen her ever since.

III

Despite all her father's hints and Aunt Olga's persuasions, Katyenka insisted that they go home immediately after supper. At dawn she was already sitting in bed, worn out and over-

excited, waiting for Kondraty, who was getting her father ready for bed.

Katyenka had always felt that the prince would want to offer her a last insult, she was expecting it and was preparing her defence. In her imagination he was always the abuser and she was the offended innocent. The best defence of all, of course, would be to maintain an indifferent, contemptuous, icy calm on meeting him. But now all these foolish ideas meant nothing at all.

The prince, ragged, unhappy, gaunt, had stirred her imagination and aroused her curiosity. He was not triumphant, not an abuser but was begging for mercy, praying, as though her glance meant life or death to him. That's what she now felt. Her heart was breaking from sorrow. The strangest thing of all was that Katyenka did not feel—although she wanted to—the anger and hurt she had formerly felt.

At last Kondraty came, closed the door carefully and then asked mysteriously:

“What is it?”

“Kondraty, I have seen the prince.” (Kondraty only coughed.) “I don't understand anything.... He was begging for alms. Unhappy, gaunt.... Has he murdered somebody or what? ... Why is he hiding?”

“Very simple, he's murdered somebody,” said Kondraty.

“For God's sake, don't tell father anything. Go to Miloye or to town at once ... go where you like....” Her voice broke off for a minute. “If you see him don't tell him I sent you. No, it doesn't matter, say what you like.... Only don't let him torment me any more.”

Kondraty went out. Katyenka sat on the bed looking at the patches of light on the old parquet where the sun's rays broke through the foliage. Through the open window the whistling of the oriole, the cooing of the doves and the chirping of the sparrows came from a garden still bathed in dew, a green and luxurious garden. A foolish fly was beating against

the upper panes of the window and did not have sense enough to go lower down. The fly probably thought that the blue sky was just within reach, sliding over the window, and that the trees, and the butterflies white as flowers and the birds and the dew were all a dream that it could reach only if it banged itself to death against the glass.

"How that fly bothers me," said Katyenka and she slipped out of bed and with a towel beat at the glass and drove the fly out into the garden, then folded her hands behind her back and began pacing up and down the room.

The whole of that tormenting, passionate year of her life passed through her mind. There had been no joy in it. As she now recalled it, however, she did not feel either pain or hopelessness. It was as though all that had been was over and had passed into the hazy distance, had developed into a sweet sorrow. The feeling of liberty was left and that inexplicable joy that is felt only by very young, strong and passionate people.

Katyenka rubbed her hands firmly over her face and eyes, shook her head and suddenly with unusual clarity of vision peered into the very depths of her soul.

Having taken that look she forgot herself, smiled tenderly with a clear fresh smile.

"All right," she repeated, "I'm ready."

IV

All the servants of the prince's household at Miloye were gathered in the kitchen listening to footman Vasily's account of how His Excellency the Prince had arrived suddenly by night from somewhere unknown.

"I saw a tramp creeping into the house, and I said to him: 'Where d'you think you're going, hairy face?' and he greeted me—'Good evening, Vasily. And how is everything at home, everything all right?' I nearly died. I saw it was him! He was

wearing clothes worse than our herdsman Yefimka wears. Well, I took him upstairs to the bedroom. He pointed to a chair: 'Is that,' he asked, 'where the mistress sat?' I told him she sat everywhere. He looked at the chair as though it were a woman. I almost burst from laughing. 'Go now,' he said, 'I'll fix things myself, but prepare a bath.' I looked through the crack of the door and saw what he has come to: he lay on the princess' bed and hugged the pillow. Probably starved. I suppose various ladies in the town have fleeced him. He's sleeping now, he'll sleep for a couple of days if we don't wake him. Yes, I've lived in a good many places but I've never seen such goings on before."

Vasily straightened a waistcoat with two watch chains, got out a cigarette case (a gift from the prince), lit a cigarette and crossed his legs.

"I don't know how he'll manage to live with the princess now. It will be no easy job for him. We'll see some fine things."

Everybody in the kitchen was eaten up with curiosity. People came running from the workers' quarters to listen to Vasily. And the prince slept on. Suddenly Kondraty appeared at the back door, dusty and gloomy; he asked sharply:

"Has the prince arrived?"

"Yes, he's arrived all right," answered Vasily, "but the orders are not to wake him."

"You'll have to wake him."

Kondraty had to stand a long time at the bedroom door coughing and tapping with his fingers. At last the prince answered in a sleepy voice: "What? I'll get up, right now..." He must have sat up in bed for some time before he could collect his thoughts, then he said in a different voice: "Come in."

Kondraty, his lips pressed together, went in. Alexei Petrovich looked straight at him for several minutes, jumped out of bed, ran to him, sat him down on a chair and turned so pale, trem-

bled so violently that the old servant forgot all the insulting words he had intended hurling at His Highness, turned away, champed his jaws and then said simply:

"The princess ordered me to enquire after your health. In the winter she almost died herself. And she doesn't wish to see you on any account."

"Kondraty, did she send you herself?"

The prince seized his hand.

"You must understand yourself. I have nothing to tell you because you acted dishonestly. I was ordered to enquire after your health and nothing else."

The prince did not speak for a long time. Then, leaning his head on the table, he wept. Kondraty's heart was softened towards him but nevertheless he did not give in.

"That's all," he said moving towards the door.

"Don't go, wait a minute," said the prince, stretching out across the table, "I'll write."

With a spluttering, rusty nib, he began to write in quivering letters:

"Dear Katya.... (He crossed that out.) I ask nothing of you and do not dare.... But you are the only person in the whole world that I love. I had a companion, he's in prison now, he taught me to love.... When I think of you - my soul is filled with light, joy and happiness such as I have never known.... I know that I am not worthy of seeing you.... Still, forgive me.... If you can forgive me... *I will come on my knees....*"

V

Tsuryupa came to Volkovo in the evening (he had become a frequent visitor that summer) and went straight to Alexander Vadimych's study; terribly indignant, he began to tell him about the prince. Volkov, however, interrupted him.

"I know everything, it is a great misfortune and I have

even turned grey, and please don't mention that scoundrel's name any more." Volkov walked over to the window and began to talk about farming. Just then Kondraty drove into the yard in a gig.

"Where's that old devil been?" mused Volkov and bending over the window sill, shouted to him:

"Where have you been?"

Kondraty shook his head and drove up to the window where he explained that he had brought a letter for the princess. "Oho," said Volkov and shutting the window went to his daughter's room.

Tsuryupa became uncommonly excited, guessing that the letter was from the prince.

Before a minute had passed Volkov came running back, breathing heavily, red and furious.

"No ink!" he shouted, pushing at the inkpot. "Where's that pencil gone?" Seizing the pencil that was quickly offered him, he wrote in big letters "SIR" on that same sheet of paper on the other side of which he had drawn the hare, fox, wolf and dogs a year ago, then dropped back in his chair and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"What's happened?" asked Tsuryupa cautiously. "Tell me all about it, perhaps I can help?"

"But it's sheer insolence!" screamed Alexander Vadimych. "No, I'll answer. What a scoundrel of a fellow!" "SIR. I cannot find words to account for such a brazen action," he wrote.

"D'you understand, he's asking for pardon, has sent a note, as though nothing had happened. And I'll answer: 'My daughter is not a housemaid that you should send her notes. It is, indeed, fitting for you to come on your knees (he under-scored the last words) and with the greatest humility beg her pardon under her window...'"

"Oh, isn't that a bit too strong?" said Tsuryupa, his monocle in his restless eye, reading over Volkov's shoulder.

"There's no other way of bringing things home to such unfeeling people, though. I would advise you to hand the whole business over to a lawyer. And how is Yekaterina Alexandrovna? Is she upset?"

"What?" screamed Volkov on a still higher note. "She's crying, of course. And what has it to do with you? Get to hell out of here."

Katyenka, however, was not crying. While she was awaiting Kondraty's return she stood at the window with her fists clenched, or sat down in a deep armchair, or took up a book and kept reading the same phrase over and over again: "Then Yury, filled with noble wrath, rose to his full height and exclaimed: 'Never in my life.'" She would put down the book and repeat to herself: "I must be firm, I must be firm." Her thoughts were already far away and she could again see the round globe of the electric lamp and standing under it on the wet asphalt a pitiful looking man, and she could see his eyes—huge, mad, dark. . . . Katyenka covered her face with her hand, got up and walked about, took up the book and read: "Then Yury, filled with noble wrath. . . ." Oh God, oh God, and Kondraty still does not come, and the day dragged out like a year.

At last she heard her father's heavy footsteps in the passage, the door opened with a crash and he and Kondraty came in with the letter.

Katyenka went as white as a sheet and pressed her lips together. Her father tore open the envelope and thrust the letter before her. She began reading slowly. Before she had read to the end she understood, understood everything that the prince felt when he had written those pitiful lines. Her spirit became calm and solemn. She handed the letter to her father. He read it rapidly and then asked in a voice that trembled with excitement:

"Will you answer yourself?"

"I don't know. As you will. It doesn't matter. . . ."

"Then I'll answer," roared Alexander Vadimych. "I'll answer him. . . . Let him crawl here on his knees. . . . Boasts that he'll come crawling on his knees. . . . Let him crawl!"

"His Excellency is not himself," Kondraty put in warily. "He is very much upset."

"Silence! I know what to do," screamed Alexander Vadimych; he thrust the prince's letter into his trousers' pocket and ran out of the room. . . .

Katyenka shouted after him:

"No, Papa, I'll write myself. . . . Wait!" and was about to run to the door, but stopped and dropped her hands to her sides. "It doesn't matter, Kondraty, what is to be will be."

"He'll come crawling, he'll crawl to you on his knees," said Kondraty. "He's in such a state that he'll crawl. . . ."

The letter was sent to the prince next day just as dawn was breaking. Katyenka knew what her father had written but her heart was calm and clear.

VI

In the morning clouds as grey as smoke rolled over Volkovo, a rich odour came from the corn and grass fields, columns of dust whirled along the roads and disappeared behind the hill, the thunder rumbled, there were flashes of lightning but not a single drop of rain, it seemed to be saving it up in order to burst in a warm downpour over the roof, garden, and fields.

Alexander Vadimych sat at the upper window of his house behind the branches of a birch tree; with one eye closed he was studying the road through a telescope.

The boys of the estate workers had climbed on to the roof of the carriage house and were staring at the place where the road that wound round the hill disappeared amongst the corn-fields.

In the open gates of the carriage house stood a grey colt harnessed to a light carriage. The coachman sat on a log by the wall, slapping his bootleg with his big whip. The milkmaid, coming out of the ice cellar, stood her bucket of milk on the grass and also stared, folding her arms under the apron.

A peasant came up on a cart, removed his cap, bowed to the master at the window, got off the cart and stood perfectly still. Everybody was waiting.

Katyenka, fully dressed, was lying on her bed, her head buried in the pillow. The messenger who had been sent to Miloye with the letter had already returned with the answer that the prince had started crawling.

Three hours before Kondraty had gone out to meet him. According to Alexander Vadimych's calculations the prince should by now be crawling up the sandy hill where the elder clumps on the riverbank began and where it was even difficult for the horses to pull a carriage.

Suddenly the boys on the roof began to shout.

"He's coming, he's coming!"

Volkov, his slippers flapping, hurried to his daughter's room. Katyenka, however, was already on the porch. Her braids had come undone and were hanging down her back. Holding on to the column of the porch she peered at the distant road.

The peasant who was standing by the cart spoke to the milkmaid.

"Is it the governor they're waiting for?"

"Who knows, perhaps it is the governor," answered the woman; she took up her pail and went away.

A pedestrian appeared, coming along the road from behind the hill. The boys on the roof shouted again.

"It's a woman, a woman, a beggar..."

Then Katyenka tore her hand away from the column, went down into the yard and shouted:

"The carriage, quickly!"

With a rattle the grey stallion dashed out of the carriage house. Katyenka jumped into the carriage, snatched the reins from the coachman, slapped the horse on the back with them and dashed away, leaving a trail of dust behind her.

The cloud of dust hung over the road for a long time, then whirled into a column and dashed across the field to the consternation of the superstitious who believed that if you threw a knife into one of those roving columns of dust it would collapse and a drop of blood would remain on the knife.

Halfway up the sandy slope of the hill that rose up above the undergrowth of elders, the prince was on his knees, supporting himself on his hands in the sand. His head was bowed, sweat poured from his face, there was a whistling sound in his throat as he breathed, the veins on his neck were strained until they stood out, blue in colour.

Behind him, holding by the bridle a roan gelding that was tossing its head and brushing the flies away, stood Kondraty, looking with pity at the prince and sighing deeply.

The horseflies also hovered over the prince's head but Kondraty would not allow them to settle on him.

"That's enough, sir, get up, why it's a mountain," he said. "I'll put you on the gelding and soon as we come within sight of Volkovo you can crawl again, it's downhill there."

Alexei Petrovich straightened his back with an effort, threw forward a badly lacerated knee that was coated with congealed blood, a knee in a torn trouser-leg, hurriedly crawled a few paces and again fell. His face was grey, his eyes were half closed, a lock of hair was stuck to his forehead and there were sharply defined wrinkles around his mouth.

"You still have a long way to crawl," repeated Kondraty. "Get on the gelding, in the name of Christ Our Lord, I beseech you!"

He looked piteously at the sand hill and suddenly stood stock-still.

From the hilltop Katyenka came racing down, thrashing the grey with her reins. She had already seen her husband, turned the carriage sharply aside, jumped out without stopping it, ran to Alexei Petrovich, sat down beside him and hastily lifted up his face. The prince straightened up, seized Katya's hand firmly and began looking very, very closely into her wonderful eyes with tears running down from them....

"I love you, I love you, of course I do," she said and helped her husband to his feet.

1919





THE GULLIES

I

THE LANDLORD, David Davidych Zavalishin, lived at a farmstead in the steppes beyond the seven gullies.

The deep gullies which lay between his farmstead and the village had filled with water to overflowing, and the roads over the crumpling, unstable ice could no longer be discerned; the low mounds bordering the gullies were laid bare; last year's shaggy burdocks still grew on them and the wind blew cold across the fields, rustling through the leafless willows.

Everybody was waiting, expecting the water to burst through; men from the farm ran with lanterns during the night to see whether the dam had not given way; travelers had been languishing at the inns in the village for three days in succession, looking out of the windows at the already dangerous floods: the mail was not delivered and local officials no longer went from place to place about their business. Only David Davidych was unconcerned.

He had lunched and drunk his tea, unfastened the belt round his silk blouse and now lay on the sofa opposite the window.

The windows in the next room had been opened and he could hear a hen clucking in the sunshine; she was just starting another cluck when the rooster came up to her and she screeched in a voice that was not her own. Then a foal in the corral neighed loudly. The voices of the cook and the merry

coachman came floating across the yard and when they died down the sleepy dog began beating its tail against the sides of its kennel. The sparrows jumped and chirped and fussed about as though they were drunk; the doves closed their eyes and cooed in honeyed tones; and David Davidych covered his ear with a cushion and tried to sleep. . . .

But it was hard for him to get to sleep—impossible, in fact; the sun on the well-scrubbed floor was hot, the new walls smelt of resin, a buzzing fly was whirling round in the shafts of light between window and floor but the main thing was that everything that was happening in the room and outside belonged to its own world while he was alone in his. The fly alighted on his nose. David Davidych frowned, blew at it, grew angry, caught it deftly and held it, still buzzing, in his fist.

"I'll give you to the hen," said David Davidych, unwillingly climbing down from the sofa; he went into the next room, leaned out of the open window and called to the hen. At his beckoning a white Brahma hen, his favourite, came strutting up to him; holding her head on one side she looked at him with one red eye.

"Here, take this," said David Davidych, holding out the fly, but the hen pulled her head back suddenly and the insect flew away. It was quite warm in the sunshine and a scent of earth pervaded the air. Three paces away, however, there was still a crust of dirty snow; the farther one went from the house the whiter the snow became and David Davidych, raising his eyes, saw his fallow fields, still under snow, the mounds with their burdocks, the blue line of trees and beyond it the modest white church with its light cross.

David Davidych remained for a time leaning over the window sill, a frown on his forehead and the tips of his eyebrows drawn. His big, straight nose was slightly red, a light, curly beard and small moustaches covered his mouth which was tight-pressed in a grimace of sorrow.

II

The three days preceding the flood when all the forces of the earth were brought to bear on what was left of the but recent supremacy of winter, when the earth shook itself in order to open up, to give voice, to make itself heard—these three days had been a difficult time for David Davidych.

He was in his thirtieth year. That January he had separated from his wife and had returned, after many years' absence, to the small family estate, where the garden had been cut down, the old house burnt and everything else that he remembered and loved, even that on which he could have lived without any further thought, seemed to have been uprooted or burnt.

The burnt-out house in which Zavalishin had been born had been so big and intricately built that one was always discovering new rooms and nooks.

The garden, too, had been intricately designed, dark and mysterious, the apple trees, driven out of all other places by thick growths of acacia, bird cherry, lilac and black alders, flourished only around the balcony; beside the pond at the foot of the hill there was a constant clamour, day and night, in the century-old black poplars—in their hollows lived squirrels and owls, whole colonies of birds sang, hooted and whistled in the foliage and at night the bats flitted about and the toads croaked. Thick tall grass had grown up in the glades and in the long avenues of trees.

When David Davidych was no higher than his father's knee his mind was constantly filled with that riotously growing herbage. Tulips, wormwood, white and yellow clover, huge burdocks and timothy grass with dodder winding round them, waved and blossomed above his head: up above the undergrowth there were elusive moths and butterflies and evil insects that made loud noises. David Davidych lived in the herbage and grew up with it, he learnt many things from it—how to

crawl unseen and attack, how to avoid attack, how to hide and how to run, bent low, in the green undergrowth.

When he grew older and wiser the grass was just grass to him and nobody lived in it but beetles and hedgehogs. At that time he discovered a long, half-dark room furnished with black cupboards. Here there were books, mice and a smell of the mould of wisdom. David Davidych would sit on a deep sofa and read adventure stories. He learned to love the carefree ways of the animals and birds and all living creatures, but he began to regard the grass as hostile and fought against it with a wooden sword. He climbed the poplars, robbed birds' nests, shot arrows from a bow and killed tadpoles with a harpoon.

With each successive summer, however, David Davidych became more and more convinced that there was nothing extraordinary in the garden no matter how many dark corners he might discover and explore; he felt bored as though mysterious events lay ahead of him but the present was merely tiresome, there was nothing for him to do.

Later on this expectation of the unusual and mysterious became a more frequent obsession with him and frequently he thought that life was boring, well known and familiar. In his boyhood this expectation coincided with a domestic calamity. David Davidych's father often went away (at such times his mother was particularly sad) and when he returned went about looking downcast; David Davidych was sometimes awakened by his angry shouting coming from the bedroom downstairs and on such occasions he lay in his bed and wept. The next morning Mamma would be as pale and sad as usual; the father, scarcely suppressing the wrathful glint in his black eyes would draw his son towards him and distractedly stroke his head until it both bored and hurt David Davidych. Sometimes Mamma would run swiftly into the garden and press her son closely to her and kiss him as though he had been saved from some misfortune; but David Davidych did not understand this tenderness either.

One day his father came back from town accompanied by a little dark-haired lady who smelt of perfume and Mamma suddenly became unusually vivacious—she laughed, rode on horseback, sang and went walking with the visitor. Soon afterwards David Davidych ran into his father in the garden—he was standing behind a big tree, his head sunk into his shoulders and a revolver in his hand; in the distance, Mamma in a white shawl was walking slowly down the avenue. David Davidych touched his father's elbow and he dropped the revolver, closed his eyes and let out a terrible scream. . . . That same night Mamma awakened David Davidych, took him out into the back yard, seated him in a tarantass and they drove on until dawn, when, from the fringe of the steppes, they could see the domes of churches, the water tower and the houses of the provincial centre.

All that winter David Davidych was bothered with grammars and theology but he read Turgenev and then Gogol. In the spring he failed in all subjects but for all that he understood what mysterious encounters awaited him in the old house and garden.

During St. Thomas' week his father came to the hotel where they were living; he had grown very thin but he was kindly, talked with Mamma and sat on the sofa covering his face with his hands. then he took his son back to the country. The little dark lady was no longer living there.

David Davidych, however, was not happy for long. The garden and the house cast new spells over him. He would penetrate into the dark undergrowth beyond the pond, look behind the big black poplars, move aside the shrubs in the parterre where the benches and one-legged tables were rotting away, go into the unused and dusty rooms upstairs and look at the columns in the drawing room through the coloured glass panes of the locked doors—everywhere he was afraid of meeting somebody; still he wandered about sadly awaiting this encounter. He had grown thinner and taller; dark rings formed

under the eyes and he hid himself whenever he heard his father's voice; when he was asked whom he was longing for, he blushed and the garden became like a fairyland to him for *It* lived and hid there. *It* might turn out to be a girl, as in Turgenev, or a sun-tanned Ukrainian lass wearing a wreath of poppies, or a witch with bare legs, or even a mermaid.

Sitting on the trunk of a birch tree bent horizontally over the water, David Davidych would gaze for long periods into the pond, at the water lilies, at the reflection of the reeds, at the calm, green water and wait for a dangerous mermaid to rise out of the depths and, with graceful movements of her arms, swim under the very roots of his birch tree.

It appeared in the raspberry canes one afternoon in June. It turned out to be a thin little girl in a blue blouse, barefooted and hatless, with a funny face and big eyes. David Davidych was disappointed when he saw that *It* looked so ridiculous but nevertheless he went up to her, frowned and asked:

"What are you doing here?"

The girl smiled, looked at him and ran away, tossing her plait of black hair.

David Davidych began to visit the raspberry patch every day and met her again, this time with a basket. He himself picked raspberries for her and they sat down on the grass: he asked her her name. The girl shook her head and lifted her blue eyes to the sky so that two clouds were immediately reflected in them.

"Perhaps you live in the pond?"

"No," answered the girl, "I live with Mummy, the priest's widow, and I'm called Olyenka."

When they were through with the raspberry David Davidych showed the girl over the whole garden and then took her to the library where he began reading his favourite stories aloud to her.

At first the girl only laughed but then she began to understand and listened with close attention; once she even cried

bitterly over the touching description of a little girl who lost her way in the snow at night.

When David Davidych saw her tears he immediately swore that he would never cause her such sorrow.

"Kiss the cross," said the girl and unfastening a china button she laid bare the brass cross on her thin chest....

David Davidych kissed the cross and looked at the serious girl. she also looked at him and both of them blushed.

"Why have you gone all red like a coachman?" asked David Davidych.

The girl did not come any more after this and to await her coming he used to climb a tree from which he could watch the road overgrown with sorrel, the oak grove and the church beyond it. He wrote his first verses sitting in that tree; they began like this:

*A beggar, bent and blind and lame.
With bag and staff walked down the lane,
He met Nature on his way,
Lifted his bag and for alms did pray....*

Quite unexpectedly his father returned from the town accompanied by Mamma and they walked peacefully arm in arm along the avenues and sat on the balcony in the twilight....

"Well, life so far did not turn out well so we'll start over again," repeated Father softly several times.

David Davidych was very pleased to have his mother back and glad that he was no longer treated as though he had escaped some misfortune but at night he began to be troubled with dreams that were full of tapping, rustling and running about and when he awoke he heard the same noises and fell to wondering whether the old rat was not up to some mischief.

For a long time an old grey rat as big as a cat had been living in the house; it was so cunning and so evil that nobody had been able to kill or poison it. In the evenings it would climb on to a chair and watch them eating and when anybody

went near it it would whistle and jump high into the air; not long before it had bitten the drunken cook in the head.

Shortly after her arrival Mamma ordered a fire to be lit in a grate whose chimney had not been cleaned since the winter before and she and Father sat beside it in armchairs....

Father looked at Mamma and his raised brows drew together; tears were falling from Mamma's eyelashes.

Suddenly the hot coals flew in all directions with a loud crack and the rat, all covered with flames, leaped out of the fire and disappeared in a far corner.

Father ran about the house with the firetongs; Mamma seized hold of her son and did not regain her calm for a long time.

At last David Davidych was taken upstairs, undressed and had the sign of the cross made over him many times; then he was told to go to sleep. It seemed that he scarcely closed his eyes before the burning rat ran into the room, described circles on the floor and began jumping higher and higher towards the ceiling. It suddenly reached the ceiling, ran round it in circles, crawled down the walls, squeaked pitifully, and began to shake the burning coals and flames from its body; the fire filled the room with a rosy light.

"Fire," came a voice at last, as though from a great distance. David Davidych sat up in bed and called his mother. The house was silent and dark. Somewhere, however, he could hear a creaking and crackling.

David Davidych pulled the bedclothes up to his chin and covered his head with a pillow but again came the penetrating, inhuman shriek of "Fire." This time David Davidych jumped out of bed and threw open the door. A bright red merry fire licked him with its sharp tongues; the fire was raging on the spiral staircase as though it were a chimney.

David Davidych slammed the door to and stood listening; soon he distinguished the voices of his mother and father in the general commotion: "David, David..." He ran to the

window, clutched hold of the branch of a lime tree and fell into the grass together with the broken twigs.

"Thank you, grass, I won't forget that," he said without knowing exactly why; he began to watch how the light flowed out of the windows—there were neither lamps nor candles in the rooms but they were all lit up, the curtains rustled and the tongues of flame played on the wallpaper....

"That's the rat running about in there," thought David Davidych and ran across the damp grass until he reached the pond. A dense black smoke that seemed to be tinged with blood now rose from behind the tops of the tall trees that hid the house; then the smoke grew lighter and a fiery corona leaped and danced over the treetops.

"That's the King of the Rats climbing up," thought David Davidych.... But the flames of the corona leaped higher and higher and merged into one huge flame that curled over at the top and emitted showers of sparks. Shadows as black as pitch lay on the grass as far as the pond itself; the water seemed alive and mobile and the trunks of the birch trees glowed red down one side. The little birds folded their wings and fell from above into the fire.

The next morning saw the garden looking quite ordinary again except for the dirt that lay on the bushes and on the grass. Carefully pushing aside the branches Olyenka appeared nearby; she ran to David Davidych and took him by the hand.

"I told them you would be here," she said and she took him out of the garden to the back yard. Two figures covered with a curtain, lay on the grass beside the stables.

"Kneel down and pray for Papa and Mamma," said Olyenka.

David Davidych was taken care of by an aunt in St. Petersburg. He lay sick almost the whole winter but by the spring he had grown taller, his voice broke, and it seemed that he had forgotten all about his father and mother, and about Olyenka and his vows. Then followed long years of schooling;

with the aid of the generally-accepted means these years produced a young man of the generally-accepted type who went out to live his own life.

David Davidych had completed his training as a lawyer and began to look out for a place to settle down in and, without coming to any decision, he set out for his native town; this at least was a place that he knew.

Here he noticed that most of the people lived like this, without thinking or coming to decisions, and enjoyed whatever pleasures came their way.

David Davidych was accepted as one of their own set and he settled quite comfortably into the very lap of pleasure. He was appointed to the courts, he rented a flat, seduced the investigator's wife and began to think of himself as a nice pleasant young man and a danger to husbands. In the spring he took a trip to Zavalishino. The once rich estate had been ruined by guardianship fees. A new wing stood beside the ashes of the old house; an ancient gelding, covered in lumps and bites wandered about the weed-grown yard, witness of bygone days; the farm buildings were empty and slowly falling to pieces, the garden had become thinner; hazy and mysterious memories drove David Davidych hurriedly away without even asking the steward for a report

The following winter he was persuaded to marry Anna Ivanovna, a very rich woman of the merchant class. The gentry of the district had lost their lands and nobody was to be found to fill the post of Marshal of the Nobility. Anna Ivanovna had been educated in Paris, owned a mansion furnished in Empire style and wanted a coat of arms on her dowry. In general there was no reason for not marrying her. Before the wedding David Davidych was advised to put his papers in order, and he made another trip to Zavalishino.

It was spring. Countless birds were singing and a rich odour came from the earth. When David Davidych, still some distance from the estate, saw the black poplars around his pond, he

ordered the coachman to turn straight into the village without passing the homestead and to draw up at the church wall. The bricks in the whitewashed wall were laid to make a pattern of pierced crosses. White lilacs in bloom behind the wall thrust their branches out into the streets. As David Davidych entered the churchyard he saw a girl in a white dress seated on a bench under a lilac tree and staring penetratingly at the newcomer. David Davidych bowed to her and asked where he could find the priest.

"The old priest has died," said the girl, rising and smoothing her dress, "the new priest is coming tomorrow, I am his fiancée...."

"What a pity," said David Davidych and explained that he had come to check up his birth certificate, and gave her his name.

"I know," answered the girl, "I recognized you but you didn't—I'm Olga, the priest's widow's daughter...."

"Impossible; excuse me, are you the same ... remember...."

"I remember," answered Olyenka, "but you had better go to the sacristan, he has the church books," and she went ahead of David Davidych, walking rapidly, but with a light and easy grace, straight into the church; while he looked through the books she stood aside and waited.

He looked at her with a smile to which she did not respond and when, on the way out, he took her hand and said: "So we meet again, how strange...." she pulled her fingers from his hand and gave him such a look, her blue eyes darkening with indignation, that David Davidych did not continue the conversation.

He spent the night at an inn and next morning went back to the church to enquire about Olyenka from the deacon.

He learned that she had been educated at a Gymnasium and had remained in the village as a schoolmistress after the death of her mother. She had had many offers of marriage and even

numbered the zemstvo doctor amongst her admirers; she had refused them all and it was only in the previous autumn (at the very time when David Davidych paid his one-day visit to his estate) that she accepted the son of a priest who was waiting for his ailing father to die in order to accept holy orders himself.

Zavalishin left the church and went down towards the river where the ancient, dilapidated cottage that had belonged to the priest's widow nestled against an old willow. Olyenka was sitting at the window. She glanced up at him as he came towards the house and again there appeared in her eyes the same expression of what was apparently fear and indignation that he had seen the day before. David Davidych smiled and bowed; Olyenka's beauty aroused a strange emotion in him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked and again realized that he had said the wrong thing. He walked over to the window under which briar roses were in bloom and noticed that Olyenka was holding a little brass cross in her hand.

"I'm going to be married," said Olyenka and suddenly bent her head and frowned at David Davidych; he saw that her eyes were filled with tears; she tossed her head angrily and turned away from him.

"And I'm getting married, too, see how everything has turned out," he answered; he felt a dull and hopeless ennui after he had said these words and it seemed to him that everything was ancient history, useless and unfortunate. . . . "One has to live somehow," he added.

Olyenka did not answer at first, then she said hurriedly: "Come away from the window, it will not do for the people to see. . . . So that's it, my friend."

She jumped up and went further away into the room.

On the eve of the Fast of St. Peter, Zavalishin was married and Anna Ivanovna took him on a sea trip and then to Paris. On their return he became Marshal of the Nobility, paid up the mortgage on his native Zavalishino and kept the most hospi-

table and luxurious house in town, kept race horses, had a host of friends and later, a mistress.

When he had tasted everything within the limits of his semi-somnambulant desires David Davidych realized that Anna Ivanovna was a disgustingly bad-tempered and sensuous creature and that he himself was unhappy and unclean.

One night he came home in a bad mood; on going to his wife's apartments he heard voices coming from the bedroom, her voice and that of a man, and he pulled out his revolver and fired at the bedroom door; he did not even do it out of spite—the devil alone knew what for, just out of sheer cussedness.

Anna Ivanovna was offended and went to Berlin, but David Davidych wrote her a brief but explicit letter on a piece of paper torn from a fashion journal and settled down forever in his old home at Zavalishino.

III

It was not this story that David Davidych was pondering over as he lay on the window sill nor was he thinking of effort fruitlessly wasted: he was still wrapt in a hazy and troubling expectation of *something* (an event or a catastrophe), something of tremendous importance; although up till then his expectations had always deceived him, he still continued to believe that the present was the time for the most important thing to happen; as he rested there he was trying to get a glimpse inside himself because he believed that, although the expected event would come from the outside, it would gain full force and significance only if it was confirmed within himself.

At that moment a young bay stallion, dragging with it the coachman who was holding on to the bridle, came dashing out of the stable with a clatter of hoofs. The animal halted in the centre of the yard, swished its tail, neighed, rose on to its hinds and then together with the coachman began trotting round the vard.

"A beauty," exclaimed David Davidych, "what strength"—and when the stallion's perky tail disappeared round the corner he walked slowly away from the window with his hands folded behind his back. "The stallion neighs and rears, that means that spring has come and nobody worries about the fact that the time will come when he will stop rearing, lie down and stiffen. Why should it not be all the same to me, of all people?" thought David Davidych, shuffling up and down his room. "Because, this most important of all things that I am now expecting, will be my death; that's why."

He covered his eyes with his hand and imagined his funeral: it was foolish and not a bit touching, it was even quite ordinary, and David Davidych pulled a face that was suitably sad and similar to those recently worn by people attending the funeral of the President of the Court. Then he imagined the death scene—himself dying in bed—and he shook his head: what the devil!

"No, no, it will be some other event, not death!" he exclaimed hastily. "To get down to rock bottom, what makes me miserable? Everybody else is the same, everybody has something wrong. I don't know a single happy family. Why should I be different from all the others?..." He pulled his fingers till they cracked and exclaimed in desperation: "But no, everybody probably believes in something or simply lives without thinking while I believe in one thing only—that I shall die and that I don't want to..."

At that moment the door was opened cautiously and a short, lean peasant appeared in the doorway: he was dressed in a shaggy sheepskin coat with a red knitted scarf wound several times round his skinny neck. He held his cap in his hand and blinked at David Davidych.

"What is wrong, eh?" he asked.

"I did not know you were here.... What d'you want?" asked Zavalishin, somewhat confused.

"I came to see you. Good afternoon," answered the peasant and held out his hand.

David Davidych took the hand and felt the hard nails and callouses. "He's not one to worry," he thought as he sat down at the table and pushed the tray with the vodka and sausage to one side with his elbow.

"Sit down. What have you come about? Who are you?" he asked.

"Andrei, Andrei's my name," answered the peasant, sitting down on the edge of a chair and casting a side glance at the vodka. "I had a hard job of it getting here—the water's running fast: the gullies will certainly overflow today. I don't know how I got here. . . ." Merry wrinkles appeared on his thin red face. he screwed up his eyes until they were tiny slits and shook his little beard as he said with deep implication: "We got wet through."

David Davidych poured out a tumblerful of vodka for the peasant and a small glass for himself. Andrei's face took on an air of respect, he took the glass as though afraid of crushing it and drank down the vodka to the last drop, gasping over-loudly to indicate that it was effective.

"Eat, help yourself," said David Davidych, pushing the tray towards him.

"Why waste that food as a stern chaser," answered Andrei, "it only spoils the vodka. Anyway I don't see anything satisfying in that food. Give me a milk porridge—you eat and eat until you're tired of it, then chuck down your spoon, to hell with it. . . ."

Zavalishin poured out another glass and then a third after which Andrei unwound his red scarf.

"We built a country cottage near Khvalynsk: the master was very pleased with it and gave us a feast, a real treat. We just ate and ate till we couldn't manage any more. Ivan Kosoy, he's a sawyer, an envious sort of a fellow, he said to me: 'Andrei, could you eat another pot of porridge for a bottle of vodka?' I said I could and ate it up. He was sorry to part with the bottle. 'Can you eat up that loaf for another bottle?' I said yes and

ate the bread and he had to stand me another bottle. People began to laugh at me. But I was already getting into my stride. I went out into the garden and got watermelons, cantaloups and cucumbers but all that raw stuff gave me a bellyache.... Such a bellyache that when I eased myself eight little chicks were drowned in my dung. It's a game, eating. But there's nothing to be gained by it."

"But I see I can drink a lot more than you," said David Davidych.

"Of course you can."

They sat quietly for a while, Zavalishin nodded his head, sighed with great finality and then asked:

"But why did you come here, Andrei?"

"We're in trouble, David Davidych."

"Who's the we?"

"I've seen all along that you don't recognize me. And I can see your late Papa and Mamma as though they were still alive. I work for the priest's widow, I'm in service with her...."

David Davidych's hand, lying on the table, trembled so badly that he withdrew it and spoke without raising his eyes.

"What priest's widow? Olga Petrovna?"

"Yes. We call her the widow now. Her priest was drowned just a year ago. She ordered me to swim if I must but somehow to get to David Davidych and give him a letter."

Andrei fumbled inside the breast of his coat and pulled out a warm, crumpled letter.

Zavalishin rose immediately, turned to the window and read it.

"I did not want to and should not but I can't go on any longer.... Soon, perhaps even now, it will begin again.... My conscious moments are so short and so distraught.... I must hurry.... Come to me ... perhaps you can help ... in any case ... I want to see you very badly...."

"I don't understand," said David Davidych re-reading the poorly scribbled letter, "is she ill?"

"She is very ill," affirmed Andrei, "she flops down, faints when she falls, and she writhes on the floor and howls. Today we thought she was finished altogether. I remembered how your Mamma used to give the peasants drops: I told the widow and she seemed to brighten up and grabbed a pencil. 'Take this,' she said, 'take the letter to him, and tell, anyway, tell him it doesn't matter.' I didn't understand very much of what she was talking about. . . . So please give me drops of some sort. David Davidych, I'll manage to get back by nightfall I suppose. . . ."

"Drops," said David Davidych. "No. . . ." and he did not finish.

Andrei also opened his mouth and turned to the window. While they had been talking they had not noticed a strong dull sound that grew as twilight fell: it was as though the ancient forests had arisen again in the steppes and the trees were rustling.

"The ice has broken," said Andrei. "That's too bad, I can't get back to the village now and I left the cattle out."

It was not the roar of the spring waters that David Davidych heard amongst the rising gamut of sounds, but the voices of all the dear departed, all the tiny sounds of the past years and he thought he heard his own voice—and it all rose before him in one single instant which made the strange noise so loud, imperative and triumphant.

"Go and order them to harness the sled," he jerked out. "I'll go myself. But you hurry. run, and tell them to make haste. . . ."

IV

The bay, harnessed to a sled with carpet upholstery, rolled its blue eyes and dug holes in the snow as it pawed the ground. David Davidych, buttoning his fur-lined coat as he hurried down from the porch, got into the sled and took the reins: Andrei immediately sat down beside him,

"Why are you here? You stay behind, I'll go alone," said Zavalishin.

"But I can't let you go alone," answered Andrei.

David Davidych slapped the bay with the reins and it immediately broke away at a trot throwing up the snow and mud against the front board of the sled.

"More to the right, master, across the unploughed ground," said Andrei seriously after they had passed the dam. "We must cross the gullies higher up."

By this time the sun had disappeared behind a violet-coloured cloud that hid the sunset. Its edges were tinged with fluffy goldlike fleece, and the sun's rays spread out behind it. When the rays had lengthened, faded and finally become extinguished the fringe of the cloud turned red and then a deep crimson. The sky above the setting sun was as limpid as water and higher still where the blue heavens were opaque, the first cold star appeared, and then their number kept increasing until the whole sky was scattered with them. The patches of earth where the snow had thawed lay dark on the level steppe: the snow, still bluish in colour, crunched as the bay trotted easily and rhythmically over it.

"Listen, Andrei, is it true that she didn't love her husband?" asked David Davidych suddenly.

Andrei did not answer immediately; holding on to Zavalishin's waist belt he was looking left and right, apparently dissatisfied with the path they had chosen.

"Why should she love him—he was mean and disgusting," he said. "It made me sick to go into his church, only the old women went to him. When he was drowned we made a bit of a to-do, of course, and she was sorry, after all it's no good when a man is drowned for nothing but still it's easier for her now. Only she keeps having fits; they say that's because he still doesn't give her any rest even now he's dead. . . . But drive more to the right. . . ."

David Davidych, however, could no longer reach the upper

ends of the gullies. A faint light appeared over the horizon opposite to where the sun had set and the crescent of the new moon rose over the steppes. Zavalishin, encouraging the horse with his voice and slapping it with the reins, drove it straight towards the gullies. At last a dark strip appeared in the snow ahead of them. Andrei placed his hands on the reins.

"That's clay, on the far side; look how the snow has settled down on the bank. Go easy, master."

David Davidych pulled up; the stallion stamped its feet and blew out its sides. Andrei ran on ahead.

"It's sunk a whole arshine," he called back. "I came this way today as easy as anything. But the sled won't get through now, we'll have to unharness the horse."

They unharnessed the horse, removed the collar and saddle and moved on . . . The near bank sloped down and between the snow on the steppe and the gully there was a stretch of open ground covered with crushed grass from which the snow had melted. Slipping and sliding Andrei ran forward but soon got stuck.

"The ice doesn't hold," he shouted, "to hell with it, it's shallow here," and he soon scrambled up the far bank.

David Davidych was heavier built and sank deeper; the stallion that he was leading by the bridle plunged forward, sinking into the mud up to his belly, and dragging the bridle out of Zavalishin's hand he reached the far bank in a single bound; there he stood still and shook himself.

They could distinguish the belfry ahead of them and went straight towards it. On the humps between the gullies, there lay oval pools of water amongst last year's stiffened grass. The moon was already high in the heavens causing the travelers and their horse to cast shadows; here and there the crescent was reflected in the pools.

There were seven of the gullies and the middle one was the deepest and most dangerous. From the noise which the water

made one could tell from a distance that it was in spate and was washing away the snow and clay.

Long before reaching that gully, however, the two men were soaked up to the waist by the biting, icy water mixed with snow. At last they reached the middle gully.

"I doubt if we'll get across," said Andrei. "It's bitter cold."

His beard was trembling and the icicles which hung from it rustled against his sheepskin coat. He was wet through and did not know where to put his frozen fingers—he fumbled to get them into ice-bound pockets or stuck them in his mouth. David Davidych looked at the belfry. It was now visible all the way to the churchyard wall, brightly lit up in the moonlight. It did not seem strange to him that the most important thing in his life at that moment was to get to the belfry as quickly as possible; he knew that it was dangerous and difficult but it was the right thing to do.

"Take the horse and go back to the farm. I intend to go on," he said softly.

Andrei groaned from the cold and answered as though he had not heard.

"If anything goes wrong you hang on to the mane. it's a good horse and it'll get through; the main thing is to get to the clear water, you can see it near the other bank, look. . . ."

There, under the steep clay bank beyond the wide stretch of patchy snow he could see the ripples of the leaden water; the moon played on the running water and the ribs of ice. The ice in this gully had broken before the others and the water was pouring into the ponds on the far side of the village; the most dangerous place in the gully was the strip of mixed mush ice and snow near the stretch of water. . . . There was no support to be found in the bitterly cold mush of snow and ice, there was no bottom, and you could neither swim nor crawl.

David Davidych tugged sharply at the bridle of the now docile stallion and walked along the yellow patches of snow.... Andrei strode along beside him, constantly reiterating:

"See you don't let go of the horse!" He ran forward on his toes and suddenly sank up to his waist. "There's no bottom!" he shouted and scrambled out, fell on his stomach, crawled a little farther, stood up and then went in again up to the chest not far from the stretch of water.

"It's all up," said Andrei; he spread out his arms and stopped moving—only his head and his cap stuck up from the snow.

"Hold on, oh please hold on, I'll be with you in a second, right now," muttered David Davidych hardly able to speak; he let go of the bridle and began crawling towards the place where the head was sticking up. He spread his legs far apart, dropped his hands into the wet snow and shoveled it under himself from the sides; twisting and turning, pressing his feet well into the mush, he made his way forward. He no longer felt the cold; his face and his body inside the fur coat were burning; there was frost on his eyelashes which made it difficult for him to see; Andrei was already quite near; he turned his head towards the moonlight, rolled his eyes till only the whites were showing and kept opening and closing his mouth.... The snow had become quite liquid. David Davidych pushed his hands under his body and, groaning with the pain, began to unfasten the buckle on his coat in order to free himself from this encumbrance. At that moment the stallion neighed loudly behind him, reared and plunged several times.

"The reins, the reins," stuttered Andrei at last.

Zavalishin looked behind him. Apparently the stallion had caught his hoof in the reins, its head was pulled low down, its glittering eyes were bulging and it was panting for breath.

"The reins, loose the reins," muttered Andrei.

David Davidych knew that he couldn't do it and that it did not matter—let the stallion perish—but all the same he straightened himself up, jerked forward and crawling along, seized the reins and pulled them free; the horse threw up its head, snorted and then plunged forward with its hinds in the air; its forefeet caught the skirt of the open coat and David Davidych, clutching at it with his numb fingers, went under the snow into the icy water.

It may have taken him a minute or a fraction of a second to plunge into the greenish-black depths that choked his breath and gave off that unforgettable smell of wet snow. Time, however, stood still for him. "The end," he thought. Then, "And thank God for that!" As he bade farewell to life he saw calmly and clearly all his past days, saw himself as a boy, as a youth and as a man. All this appeared before his closed eyes simultaneously and in a strange perspective as though he, the onlooker, were not at the side or in the centre but all around it all. He seemed to have become so great and boundless that he included within himself the earth, the sun, the stars, everything. . . . He realized quite calmly what was good and what was bad, when he had been foolish and when he had been wise and he saw himself foolish when he had lived without love like a blind man. And then there rolled through this universe the nonsensical doggerel that he had composed sitting on the tree. . . . This was followed by a bright even light that darted swifter than lightning and that burned up all the ghosts of his reminiscences—a living, exacting, joyful light. . . . David Davidych realized that he was alive and wanted to live. His heart was engaged in a dull struggle. Water had entered his mouth and his nostrils. He fought his way forward: the fur coat fell from his shoulders as though it were a pelt stripped from him and David Davidych, striking his feet against the icy bottom, rose to the surface, hungrily breathing in the stinging, piercing cold.

The bay stallion lay in front of him with its head and mane projecting above the snow and Andrei hanging on to the mane. The horse and the peasant moved slowly away from the snow and were whirled round in the clear water; the swift current caught them, spun them around and carried them away along the steep bank. A whole island of snow broke away behind them, opening the way to David Davidych who began to swim once he was clear of the mush; he, too, was carried away by the current and for a long time struggled to get a hold on the steep clay bank. At last he caught hold of a bush where the bank was lower, pulled himself up on to his chest and then clear of the water, and walked staggering away from the bank. •

The clear, sharp-pointed crescent of the moon hung over his head. The whole sky with the stars and the moon was reflected in each of the oval pools; as David Davidych passed on he crushed the mirrorlike surface of the puddles under his heavy boots. With the greatest difficulty he turned round to look back at the gully. Andrei and the bay stallion were not far from him on the bank.

Exerting his last ounce of strength David Davidych pulled off his boots and ran to the village. In the remaining gullies the water was only up to his waist. Beside the communal granary on the brink of the last of the gullies a grey-haired watchman sat motionless in the moonlight.

"Run and fetch somebody, there are people drowning!" said Zavalishin pointing with his finger in the direction from which he had come and when the watchman finally understood what he was talking about and hurried to the village he continued on his way towards the white belfry behind which Olyenka's house stood between two lime trees.

V

Olyenka sat on a trunk covered with a felt mat, her head held between her thin hands. The blue linen frock she was wearing was badly crumpled; the black stocking on her left leg was hanging down and her shoe hung from her toes.

The candle on the card table between two shuttered windows was reflected in the dusty mirror; there were numerous tangled lines in the dust—apparently she had made them with her finger as she had gazed into the mirror thinking of some thing else. It was a low room with plastered walls, the furniture was without any arrangement. A disheveled double bed stood against a windowless wall.

Olyenka closed her eyes and swayed back and forth from fatigue, afraid even to glance at the untidy bed. One of her attacks had just passed, an unbearable nightmare that had been tormenting her for a whole year. Olyenka was resting; there was not a single thought in her sick brain. Her tormented body, bent by the struggle, swayed back and forth like the pendulum that ticked alone in the silence, sliding back and forth between the flowers on the wallpaper. The ticking of the clock was the only sound in that room: even the cricket, the stove dweller, the merry companion of long evenings, was silent. A fly approached the candle flame but at last it, too, burnt its wings, whirled round and fell.

Only once did Olyenka stop swaying and she shuddered so that the shoe fell from her foot and the hands that held her head dropped to her knees. This, however, was involuntary, like belated lightning after a storm....

A heavy fog lay over her memory, over her whole consciousness and it was only the hope, scarcely alive like a spark in all this darkness, of an answer to her letter, the hope that she would again see the man whom she had always loved, that compelled her to continue her movements, to cling to a life that was no longer bearable.

The steps leading to the outer room creaked loudly, somebody entered and crashed to the floor. Olyenka turned slowly cold, a pang of fear pierced her like a needle; she opened wide her huge eyes darkened by the ash-coloured circles around them, leaped from the trunk, seized the candle and ran into the outer room, supporting herself by the jamb of the door.

David Davidych lay stretched on the floor, his arms bent under him. His jacket, frozen stiff, stuck out all round him and the heels showing through his torn stockings were covered with blood.

Olyenka held one hand to her throat and, holding the dancing candle in the other, screamed out loudly. The cook, adjusting her kerchief as she came, scrambled sideways out of the kitchen door. Olyenka sat down beside the body and took David Davidych's head between her hands trying to lift it and look into his eyes.

"He came, he remembered," said Olyenka, turning to the cook, "he's breathing, he's breathing..."

"Good Lord. I'll run for the neighbours, we can't lift him up alone," cried the cook and ran out into the street.

David Davidych began to groan and tried to get up by himself. Olyenka helped him, holding him by the shoulders. At last he managed to speak.

"Olyenka!"

"What, dear? What is it, darling? I can't manage alone, someone will come in a minute..."

"Olyenka, thank God..." he did not finish but fell to the floor again, breathed deeply and suddenly raised himself and sat against the wall.

His eyes were dim and his hair, stiff with ice, stuck out in all directions. He looked at the candle for a long time and then dropped his head on his chest. Olyenka sighed softly.

Three, neighbouring peasants, brothers, came clumping in and bowed to Olyenka.

"You take his head and you his feet," they said to each other briskly, "don't knock him against the door," and they lifted him easily, took him inside and sat him on the trunk. "You must get his clothes off and pour two teacups of vodka with salt into him," said the peasants.

The cook hurried to fetch vodka and a cup and David Davidych choked as he drank off the vodka; he sighed loudly, without opening his eyes, as though the heaviest burden had been removed.

"The wine's working!" said the peasants and had no sooner left the room than the cook ran back shouting.

"Where's the vodka? Oh, Lord, they're bringing our Andrei. . . ."

"Thank God for that," said David Davidych and collapsed.

With one hand Olyenka held him and with the other began to unbutton his wet clothes and pull them off, looking all the while at his face and smiling pityingly as he groaned. . . .

VI

Covered with a blanket David Davidych lay stretched out in the bed. His eyes were bright, his face red and dry. Olyenka went about the room quickly and with determination.

"You remember my oath," said Zavalishin, "well, I came. I'm quite all right. Only why is it so cold, Olyenka? It's just as if I were lying on ice. I've been restless for days: I felt that something ought to happen. Surely it could not be death. I did not want to die! . . . No matter how I tried I could not guess what it was I had to do. There was one terrible minute when I went under the water. It was really awful at first but afterwards I felt all right. What a wonderful light I saw, Olyenka! It began out in the open spaces. And d'you know I thought that the light was inside me."

Olyenka went over to him, stood quite close for a moment and then began to pace the room again.

"I didn't understand your letter," he continued, "what did I have to save you from? Who was tormenting you? Your husband is dead..."

"Be quiet, be quiet," Olyenka interrupted him quickly and then went over and sat on the bed beside him.

He closed his eyes. She did not look into his face but past him at the far end of the bed as though there were somebody by the wall. She stared for a long time and horror appeared in her darkening eyes. She slipped down to the floor, walked up and down for a while and then sat down on the trunk.

"I know that it's imagination or something," she muttered softly and despairingly, "but whatever it is, it's awful: he comes every night! Now he even comes during the day. He lies down, makes demands and threatens. And there is nothing but darkness here," Olyenka touched her head, "there are no longer any thoughts, only fragments. And I have no will power. I'm afraid, afraid. And now I have no strength left." She stopped, got down from the trunk and whispered: "He didn't die, I drove him to his death. I was never a wife to him. He used to beat me for it at night. He would kneel and kiss my feet and beg me till morning. Then he'd drag me to the floor... All the time he spoke about you. Things went so far that he began to seek death and he held that over me as a threat. 'I married you out of spite,' I said, 'I don't love you, so how can I be a wife to you? Die if you can't bear it.' When they found him in the river and brought him home dead I knew that he would never leave me. Every day, every day, still worse than when he was alive, he comes and torments me. He's here now..."

David Davidych's cheeks burned. Raising his knees under the coat that lay on the bed, he exerted all his strength, breathed noisily, smiled and, freeing one hand, took hold of Olyenka's.

"Don't think," he said, "go and lie down."

Olyenka flung her arms round his head and pressed him to her.

"But he's here all the time, look!" she exclaimed piteously.

David Davidych turned his head. There, near the wall beside him lay an unpleasant stranger; he was gaunt and dark with a long, ugly face. His body in its narrow grey dress was stretched out, the head was turned right round, the bloated eyefids were screwed up and covered God alone knew what eyes....

David Davidych smiled wryly.

"So that's him!" he said. "Come after us, have you? Take us away.... I've just seen something else. I have seen the light come to earth and rise again. I've seen the source of life. I don't want to go with you. I'd like to chase you away, to kick you out! How loathsome!"

David Davidych wanted to lift his hand but could not. He closed his eyes. A wave of heat ran over his body to his head, reached his eyes and burned into them.... He spoke more frequently and more incoherently. Animals came floating out from behind the stranger, out of the wall, ran across the blanket, dropped on to the floor, went under the bed, lifted it up and rocked it.

"Why do they torment me so?" flashed through David Davidych's consciousness.... Grasping the sheet tightly he began to think furiously—why? The bristles on the animals under the bed pierced the mattress and began to stab him in the back.... "Of what am I guilty and before whom?" Again the question seared his mind like a flame.... He made desperate efforts to gather his wits together and then realized quite clearly that the stranger had begun pulling the blanket off his legs, then he fell upon him and stuffed the blanket into his mouth.

Choking, David Davidych leaped from the bed and knocked the candle over. Waving his arms in the darkness he shouted loudly for Olyenka.

Her tender arms immediately encircled him, hid his face in her dress, pressed close to her breast and a distant but familiar voice said:

"Don't be afraid, darling, I'm here, I shan't go away."

"Olyenka, Olyenka," said David Davidych, "forgive me. . . . I have realized how wrong I have been. . . . I love you and I'll try to deserve you. . . . We must never part, we must not die. Let them curse and torment us but we'll sit together in each other's arms, sweetheart. You are the only one in the whole world for me. What a great love is ours! How bright the light is!"

VII

There was no more ice in the gullies and the last cold that came with the ground frosts at night melted away before the rising sun. The belated travelers had long since left for their destinations: the landowners and the tillers of the soil were busy with the spring planting; the local authorities drove about with a clamour of bells as had been their wont; the roads had dried out, the grass had grown several inches and invisible larks flew high up under the very sun. It was already April when David Davidych fully regained consciousness and asked what time it was.

All the time Olyenka had not left his bedside, she listened to his ravings and prayed that her dear beloved should not die; with each passing day she loved David Davidych more fondly and more profoundly. Her love replaced all her former sensations and nobody any longer stood between her and her love.

Once only, in the early evening, when David Davidych was sleeping, his wasted arms crossed on his chest, Olyenka stood by the window; low down in the blue sky floated a single, strange cloud. Across the street came Andrei leading a calf on a rope; a black-eyed girl with her hair cropped, a lump of

black bread in her hand, was running along driving a black and a white sheep and a ram into the yard; the sheep were not afraid of her and would not go in while the ram, horns down, was eyeing the bread; across the street a grey-haired old man sat dozing on a bench outside a cottage; two village women, leaning out of the windows of their respective cottages, were cursing each other—and nobody paid any attention to the queer cloud. It was floating directly towards the window. Olyenka brushed her hand across her eyes but at that moment David Davidych stirred and groaned and she, shuddering as though she were breaking through a spider's web, ran to him and knelt by his side; loving him with her whole self, with every tiny drop of her blood, she asked in tender pity what hurt him, whether he did not feel easier. . . . David Davidych calmly opened his eyes, smiled for a long time and then asked:

"Sweetheart, what time is it?"

When he dozed off again, now evidently on the road to recovery, she returned to the window. The cloud had risen higher over the house—it was violet underneath with dense white and rosy whirls; it looked like a floating island with churches, domes and white trees.

"That is our land," thought Olyenka, "how wonderful, no memories and no evil."

VIII

David Davidych, wearing a sailcloth dressing gown and a woolen shawl thrown over his shoulders, was sitting on a bench under one of the linden trees. Under the windows, on the bushes and on the old linden tree the pale green leaves had come out and the sky seen through them seemed bluer. . . . The street beyond the garden fence was quiet, the villagers had gone to work in the fields. His steward stood leaning against the gate that led into the yard. . . .

"All right, do whatever you think fit, I'm still weak as you can see but in a week or so I'll probably come over and see for myself. Run along, old man," David Davidych said to him.

The steward sighed respectfully and walked away, his boots clattering merrily along the street on the other side of the fence. David Davidych did not care whether he planted wheat or oats or nothing at all. He was waiting anxiously for Olyenka's white dress to appear again from behind the bushes where the kitchen garden was.

He did not recall the past, indeed it would have been difficult for him to do so for the power of spring that made the earth green again divided the past from the present with a wall of haze. . . . He merely felt that once he had been on the other side of that hazy curtain, that a ray of light had fallen and touched his heart and led him into the present day.

He saw Olyenka's dress through the bushes. David Davidych coughed. He could have called but he thought it would be much nicer if she came to him with a serious mien, her eyes asking why he was coughing. . . .

Olyenka heard him, bent down to pass under the branches and took a seat beside him on the bench. Her thin face was tinged by the gold of the sunshine; her blue eyes looked up at him, a braid of dark hair lay on her white dress, her hands were stained with soil. . . .

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

Her lips, also tinged with a golden down, trembled, she smiled but did not answer, looking all the time more deeply into his eyes. David Davidych had had no time to get a good look at her for she had come to him so quickly and he wanted to see how she walked, raised her arms, turned her head.

"I think I must have left my handkerchief lying about somewhere. . . . Fetch it, please. . . ."

Olyenka rose lightly to her feet and treading lightly along the path went to the house, the hem of her white dress fluttering

in the breeze; she turned her head as she reached the door (he saw how lightly she walked and turned, now she would shoo away a fly—and surely enough she did).

"Darling," he thought and called to her: "No, I made a mistake, Olyenka, here's the handkerchief, come and sit beside me, why are you digging in the garden all the time?"

"We transplanted the turnips," she said; she sat down beside him, sighed, bent forward slightly and placed her hand in his.

David Davidych took her hand and kissed it and without looking at Olyenka thought how much better and finer it would be if he were to tell her the ideas that had long since come to him. "We are like people who have been through fire," ran his thoughts, "and now we are like the first people in the world, lovers, pure and wise. But we want to live and live for a very long time. How can we manage things so that we live and still remain what we are now?" It was hard to say all this and naturally Olyenka would have asked: "But why should we change?" And that was something he could not answer. Quite apart from that, his cleverly thought-out phrases did not sound clever when Olyenka sat beside him on the bench.

"We must become man and wife," he thought, "that's what I'll tell her," and, glancing at the modest Olyenka, he put one arm round her shoulder and with the other hand played with her earth-stained fingers.

"Olyenka, I love you so much," he said.

She nodded her head in confirmation and continued to sit there quietly.

"Just think of it," he continued, "all our strength will go into thinking of that one thing and if we become man and wife—what a wonderful life that would be—I would love you and love everything and then. I think I should love the whole world..."

Olyenka pushed a strand of hair back from her face and her attentive, grave eyes showed that she had understood so well

that David Davidych stopped talking. She held his hand on her knee and what had been a scarcely perceptible blush began to deepen and spread over her whole face. She opened her mouth, sighed loudly and then said:

"What are you talking about? Love me as you will. In whatever way it must be.... I don't merely love, I just live for that love...."

In the twilight they went into the house and did not light the lamps but continued telling each other that there was nothing finer than love, that one could only love once, that they liked each other tremendously and that the heavens opened up to man only at the moment of death, although they said less about that than about anything else....

In the morning Olyenka opened the window with a trembling hand and the room was filled with the scent of the earth and of grass, with the chirping of sparrows, with human voices and distant footsteps.... The blue sky showed clean, warm and azure through the burgeoning bushes. "That's my own sky," she thought, "it is so transparent and has covered the whole world," and turning round she said tenderly:

"You've been sleeping long enough."

David Davidych opened his eyes and looking at the slender silhouette of the young woman in the window he thought:

"Olyenka, the sky, spring, happiness—that's what I've always longed for."





ARKHIP

I

A SPIDER, its shaggy legs widespread, dangled over the white tablecloth, green-winged midges fluttered lightly round the lamp shade, a gnat had burnt one of its long legs and was dragging it along the table. . . . The ivy on the balcony rustled, a sleepy bird hopped about in the bushes.

Alexandra Apollonovna Chembulatova was breaking up a biscuit, nodding her grey head with a black lace cap that looked like a fluttering bat.

"Volodya is guarding the garden," said Alexandra Apollonovna with a kindly glance at her companion, the young landlord, Sobakin, a neighbour of hers, "I gave him a pistol."

Sobakin smiled, puffing out his round, rosy cheeks.

"I assure you that Oska the horse thief does not exist. The priest's horses were stolen and the rumour immediately flew round the uyezd—Oska, they say, has come, and Oska is merely a collective name, popular fantasy has given him his mysterious strength and skill."

The old lady shook her head.

"No, it's all true: he stole the horses in the evening and next morning he was seen three hundred versts away. . . ."

"Was he really seen?"

"That's just the point: they say he is unusually short in stature, bald, strong and has a thick black beard down to his waist. . . ."

Sobakin smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders.

"He has appeared twice in this uyezd," continued the old lady, "and he raised such a scare that the local gentry chained up their horses and gave the stableboys loaded guns.... Still he managed...."

"If he's known by sight why isn't he arrested?"

"The peasants won't give him away, they're afraid he'd burn them up just as he burnt up your Khomyakovka, about three years before you came here."

"To tell you the truth, Alexandra Apollonovna, I'm beginning to be afraid."

"You have every reason to be worried: if I had a stallion like yours I wouldn't sleep at night, I'd keep watch all the time...."

"Yes, that Wizard is a miracle of a horse: you'll see, at Christmas I'll have him in the races."

"Yes, it's bad, bad: especially as your Arkhip...."

"Arkhip's a gloomy fellow but he's very reliable; he's as shaggy as a bear, eyes like a wolf's but he's trustworthy...."

"Ho, ho...." said the old lady.

A high-school boy came up onto the balcony from the garden, laid a pistol on the railing and said with a groan:

"Grandma, some tea, please."

"Be careful with that pistol, mind where you put it," said Alexandra Apollonovna anxiously.

"But it isn't loaded, Grandma."

"That doesn't matter." And Grandma got up with a rustle of her wide skirts and covered the pistol over with a table napkin.

"Well, Volodya, how are your robbers getting on?" asked Sobakin.

"All right," answered Volodya, stuffing cheesecake into his mouth.

"Have you killed anybody?"

"I think there's somebody standing behind the willows on the dam only I'm scared of walking across the dam."

"It's damp near the pond at night," said Alexandra Apollonovna.

The boy screwed up his eyes slyly.

"I've got some powder, Grandma...."

"Where did you get it? Give it to me this minute.... Volodya, don't you dare run away. Sobakin, please, run after him and take the gunpowder away from him."

Smiling, Sobakin went into the garden and was soon dashing past the balcony, waving his arms, looking like a boy himself; Volodya, bending low, squealed but did not let himself be caught.

"Children, children," thought Alexandra Apollonovna and counted the chimes as the clock in the dining room struck eleven.

"Volodya, where are you?" she called. "Come in to bed, it's eleven o'clock."

Just then a horseman rode past the fence and pulled up at the porch.

"Is Master Sobakin there?" called a voice.

"Who's asking for him," responded Alexandra Apollonovna in dry, businesslike tones.

"His man, Mikhailo."

Panting, his arm round Volodya's shoulders, Sobakin came up on to the balcony.

"Who's asking for me? Is that you, Mikhailo? What's wrong?"

"A misfortune, sir," said the invisible man behind the fence. "They've stolen Wizard."

When Sobakin entered his yard on a lathering horse, after a mad gallop across the dark fields, he found the stable door wide open and a crowd of peasants waving their lanterns and creating a terrible hubbub.

"Have they really stolen Wizard?" shouted Sobakin.

"A bad business, we didn't keep our eyes skinned...."

Sobakin ran into the stable. The bolt was torn off the box and there was a hole near the floor in the outside wall that the thieves had apparently entered by....

"Where's Arkhip?" asked Sobakin.

"We tried to wake him, he's asleep, drunk."

Arkhip lay on a truss of hay, his pale face, framed in a mass of black hair, thrown back.

"He's alive all right, they didn't touch him but he's very drunk," said the stablehands, trying to calm Sobakin.

"Pour water over the scoundrel."

They brought water in a stable bucket, lifted Arkhip's head and drenched it.

"Pour the whole bucket over him."

When his head, shirt and trousers were soaked Arkhip sat up and looked round him with bloodshot eyes.

"Eh?" he asked.

"Arkhip, where's Wizard?"

Arkhip got up, stooped down, looked long at the bolt and the empty headstall, even looked through the hole in the wall and then answered just as calmly.

"They've stolen him, sir. I wasn't watchful enough...."

"We went to bed," said the stablehands all together, "and Mikhailo, he said 'I'll go and look at the horses,' and then he ran back shouting 'They've stolen him, stolen him'...."

"Why the hell didn't you devils chase them?" said Sobakin menacingly.

The stablehands smiled politely.

"What sense is there in chasing them? It was him."

"Who's he?"

"Why, Oska."

"Nonsense, there is no Oska."

"Oh, yes there is, that's his work, sir, don't you doubt it."

"Nonsense," screamed Sobakin, "get mounted this minute.... After them!..."

The stablehands shifted from one foot to the other but did not move from the spot.

"Well?"

"No, we mustn't."

"How can we catch him..."

"He's a good two hundred versts away by now."

Sobakin ran to the house and shouted back at them from there.

"Saddle a horse immediately. And you, Dmitry, come to me here and get a letter for the police superintendent, and hurry up!"

... Next morning, when interrogated by the police superintendent, Arkhip answered that he had been drinking the day before and had heard nothing, he only remembered that somebody fell on his chest and twisted his arms but whether there were two of them or only one and what they looked like he did not know.

There was nothing to be got out of gloomy, bandy-legged Arkhip and he was taken to the lock-up; the superintendent, drinking off a glass of vodka that had been brought to him on a plate, shook Sobakin firmly by the hand in farewell.

"Arkhip is the cause of all the trouble," he said. "We'll make him pay." Then he went away.

The sound of his carriage bells died away under the hill and Sobakin, whistling, went out on to the balcony, down into the garden and strode along the avenue of linden trees.

"There'll be an investigation, and then a trial, but I'll see no more of Wizard than I can of my own ears. The devils, what a horse they've stolen, the devils."

Sobakin was so upset he wanted to go somewhere, do something.

"No, I'll get that horse back, I'll find him even if I have to get him from under the earth," he muttered and stood listening for a moment.

Close by, as though it had dived out of the acacias, Chembulatov's carriage, the harness bells jangling, flashed past the bushes and pulled up at the house.

"I'm very grateful to you, Alexandra Apollonovna," said Sobakin, going to meet the old lady, "just think of it, they've stolen Wizard and not left a trace behind them...."

"I warned you, but you didn't believe me, and it's just as I said," exclaimed the old lady triumphantly. "That Arkhip of yours is the cause of all the trouble, it was the same with my brother...."

They walked down the avenue, their arms behind their backs.

"There's a horsefair in Uralsk at the moment," said Alexandra Apollonovna. "Go there as fast as you can, your Wizard is more likely to be there than anywhere else...."

"Go to Uralsk?"

"Go on horseback, it's the quickest and easiest way under the circumstances; my brother also went on horseback, they stole Vadim."

"And what happened?"

"He found him, of course, found the peasant who had stolen Vadim, he was arrested and my brother got the stallion back."

"I'll go, Alexandra Apollonovna, with your blessing...."

"God help you," she said and she kissed his forehead as he bent over her hand.

For a long time they continued walking up and down the avenue, Alexandra Apollonovna in her silk crinoline and Sobakin in his short-tailed tussler jacket; the old lady gave him detailed instructions where to go, how to look after his horse so that it could travel four hundred versts in four days, where to put up....

"And be careful of the Cossacks, they're cunning...."

II

The dark steppe was warm, the stars lit up the road and the greyish road itself deadened the clatter of the horse's hoofs; a corn crane screamed in a nearby pit--there must be a farmhouse somewhere near in the steppe....

The farmhouses, treeless and waterless, grew up like mushrooms on the level steppes, studded with man-made mounds, the age-old road of the nomad peoples. There was a smell of dampness and smoke. Sobakin stood up in his stirrups to look round, saw a light, turned off the road and pushed on straight across the grass. Hearing the hoofbeats of his hack, dogs began to bark, at first softly, then louder and in unison; a night watchman sounded the alarm and Sobakin saw the dark outlines of thatched barns and cowsheds, while under the very nose of his horse, at the sides and behind him, the farmhouse dogs, hoarse in their fury, leaped at him.

The watchman appeared, whistled to the dogs and wrapped himself closer in his big coat....

"Good evening," said Sobakin, trying to get a look at the man's face in the darkness. "Whose farm is this?"

"Cossack Ivan Ivanovich Zavorykin's...."

"Is it far to the village?"

The watchman did not answer immediately.

"A long way," he said softly and to one side as though he did not know what villages there could be, nothing but the steppes.

"Can I spend the night here? Ask the master, I suppose he hasn't gone to bed yet?"

"He's in bed," answered the watchman despondently, "been in bed a long time already."

"Then what am I to do?"

"I'll ask him, you wait here." And he went away.

A little later lights appeared in three windows, the watchman came back and took the horse by the bridle.

"You are asked to come in," he said.

Sobakin went through the outer room past trunks covered with rugs, into a living room that smelt of sage and wormwood—popular protection against fleas—and leather.

Saddles, bridles and horsewhips hung from the walls and in the corner there was a big, dark icon.

"Very inconvenient," thought Sobakin, "intruding in the middle of the night."

A tall, bony old man, Zavorykin, came out of a side room, stroking his beard. He wore a blue Cossack coat fastened with a narrow belt round the waist, and the collar of his cotton shirt was open.

Sobakin introduced himself.

"You are welcome," Zavorykin greeted him in a deep bass. "I'm always glad to have guests."

In the light of the lamp his face with its tightly stretched yellow skin, long straight nose and dark eyes was like those that the schismatists drew on their icons.

"Sit down, please. Where are you riding to? To Uralsk. . . . So. . . ." said Zavorykin in his bass voice, nodding and passing his hand up and down over his face. "They have driven a lot of horses to the fair this year, not like past years."

A barefoot girl brought in a samovar, some food and vodka.

Sobakin was shy and did not know quite how to behave; he drank off the vodka and, perhaps on account of fatigue, it immediately went to his head; he told Zavorykin why he was going to Uralsk, told him the whole story from beginning to end.

"I'll get Wizard back wherever he is," he finished with some heat.

Zavorykin listened without raising his eyes, frowned, and when Sobakin had finished rapped on the table with his fingers and said:

"I would not advise you going there."

"Why?"

"They'll kill you."

"What d'you mean, kill me?"

"My advice to you is to go back home. You'll breed another stallion, it's not worth losing your life for the sake of an animal."

"You know it's not the stallion that I value so much, it's more a matter of principle."

"I understand. You're a young man, Mr. Sobakin, a fine young fellow, but you have not yet acquired wisdom. You have come to me, you don't know me, you tell me the whole story and for all you know I may have your stallion. Eh? I just put that to you as an example. After that I wouldn't allow myself to be disgraced. There are no written laws in our steppes and our wells are deep—throw a man down one, fill it in with earth and the man's gone. Don't get scared, it's only an example I'm giving you, there have been such cases, there certainly have. In our steppes the Cossack is king over forty thousand dessiatins—he holds human lives in his hands, apart from all else."

Sobakin's head was reeling from the stuffiness and from Zavorykin's talk and it seemed to him that the Cossack's face was like that of the black, old icon that looked down sternly and persistently from the corner ... the same reddish moustache above thin lips, the same sunken cheeks and accusing eyes.

He seemed to see two pairs of those eyes gazing unflinchingly at him and those framed in the tarnished silver ornament of the icon were the more terrifying.

"It must be their steppe God," thought Sobakin.

"It's strange for you to hear it, Mr. Sobakin, you people in the towns are different: you look after your bodies but you drag your souls in the dirt. But here everybody's spirit is as free as a bird. The soul is simple and there's nothing to soil it, the steppe is clean. God walks in the steppe. Here he will

judge us for our sins. Our sins are many but much will be forgiven us."

Sobakin got up from his seat.

"It's stuffy in here...."

He was terrified and wanted to get away from the old man's eyes.

"Maria!" shouted Zavorykin to the barefoot girl. "Bring the gentleman some cold water and show him to his bed in the outer room."

The carpet-covered trunks in the outer room seemed to be floating in the air, and he thought he could still hear the voice saying "God walks here, God...."

"Theirs is an awful God," thought Sobakin as he lay down on one of the trunks, "the god of the grasslands...."

The next morning, in order not to offend the Cossack, he pretended to go home but when the thatched roofs of the farmstead and the long poles with the rams' horns had disappeared in the hazy distance, he turned southward on to a broad highway, and the sun, the perfumed breeze and the merry jog of his horse made him feel happier.

Herds of wild, Siberian horses stood in crude stocks in a strong corral built in a field of couch grass.

The horses rested their heavy jowls on each other's backs, brushed themselves constantly with their tails, closing their eyes against the sun.

On all sides stretched the yellow steppes, not a hill or a tree in them, and behind was the noisy fair with the iron chimneys of the bakehouse ovens all smoking.

There was a roan horse that could not stand the captivity, and he leaped over the corral fence and flew off neighing into the steppe, breasting the breeze, his mane flying.

The Bashkir horse boys in their long faded cloaks and cape with big ear flaps began chattering amongst themselves, then they jumped on to saddled horses and gave chase. The

leader was waving a lasso. Two others raced to cut off the fugitive....

Whichever way the horse looked, the Bashkirs with their big ear flaps, were after him; he turned right, then left but the noose of the lasso slipped over his neck, his tail was twisted, he was lashed with a whip and the Bashkirs dragged him back to the corral.... The roan grunted, whinnied and fell; the Bashkirs loosed the noose around his neck and put him in the stocks.

"Won't he run away again?" Sobakin asked one of the Bashkirs.

The Bashkir grinned, baring teeth that shone white against his wrinkled face.

"Nay, nay, he's wiser now, buy him, mister..." he muttered.

"No, I don't need a horse like that, if you had a black half-blood, about sixteen hands..."

Some Russian peasants, all in new shirts, came up to them. They leaned on the top rail of the stocks and listened, their colourless eyes expressing the calm of warmth and rest.

A half-blind little peasant in a torn sheepskin coat shoved himself in amongst them, blinking his doggy eyes.

"Buying a horse, master? Will you take a look," he hurried off, but then turned back....

"What sort of horse?"

"A grey."

"No, I don't want it, I want a black."

"You don't know how to sell a black," a stout, round-faced lad put in suddenly, "I'll sell a stallion, or have I sold it. Eh?" and he stared like a sheep, even opened his mouth.

The peasants laughed.

The lad hiccuped loudly and raising a calloused hand began to sing.

"When I was a boy and free..."

"Drunk as an owl," laughed the peasants.

"Or worse."

Sobakin smiled; the lad was really drunk, thrust his chest forward and, waving his yellow fingernail under Sobakin's nose, said:

"What the devil, I wanted to sell it to you, but I've sold it, a stallion, black, with white stockings...."

"You're pretty tight," said Sobakin, "what's the holiday?"

The lad did not answer and his pale eyes turned blood-shot.... Sobakin shrank back.

"What do you mean holiday...." said the lad, threateningly moving up to Sobakin.

The half-blind peasant butted in hurriedly.

"Don't be funny, lad, the master's interested, so you answer him and then go away," and he pulled the lad by the sleeve.

"Let go of me!" roared the lad and his whole sinewy body tensed to strike a blow; a hairy arm, coming from behind him and clutching him round the waist, dragged him out of the circle of peasants.

"Get along, get along, calm down," said a bald peasant, a funny short fellow whose black beard shone in the sun and whose eyes darted back and forth like two mice.

"Let me go," cried the lad and tried to break away, his arms waving, but his comrade dragged him farther away towards the carts.

"Who's that?" asked Sobakin, quickly. "That fellow there, the bald one?"

The peasants glanced at each other and some of them moved away but an old man, his hempen shirt unbuttoned at his black neck answered him.

"Who?—Oska," and screwed up his eyes.

Osip was soon taken. Sobakin with the police chased him to a tea shop and there called to him. Osip turned round and

wriggled like a spider in the hands of the policemen who fell on him, but they got a rope round his shoulders and took him off to the lock-up.

A howling crowd ran after them. Many of them no doubt had an account to settle with Osip but had been very much afraid of him; now, however, they hooted and cursed him and there were some who capered in front, shouting "Now what're you going to do, you thief?" and struck him a blow.

The policemen held the crowd back with some difficulty and a bold police sergeant with ginger moustaches, who had suddenly appeared, ordered the crowd to disperse.

The fair was in an uproar until evening. Osip sat behind iron bars in a dark log cabin and at the interrogation denied all knowledge of the horses.

"I'm Osip, it's true, but I never stole any horses and you're making me suffer for nothing."

Sobakin decided to try and find out himself where the horse was; he would try to frighten Osip and then promise to intercede in his favour; late in the evening he went alone into the room where Osip sat.

He went in and stood in the middle of the room but could not see anything, only guessed Osip's whereabouts by his breathing. Sobakin spoke briefly and, as he himself thought, persuasively.

"Osip, everybody knows that you have stolen horses, you have many crimes to answer for, so it is better to admit them and I will speak on your behalf."

Osip did not answer.

"You know, it's not the horse that I value so much as the fact that I brought him up myself, he's like a son to me."

"That's true," said Osip calmly.

"You seem to understand, so why do you want to cause me all this trouble?"

"Why should I cause you trouble?"

"You are causing me trouble. I rode four hundred versts,

suffered a lot and then on account of your stubbornness, I lost my horse. Osip, oh, Osip."

Touched by his own words Sobakin moved nearer to him.

"Don't come near me, master," said Osip dully.

Sobakin stopped short and began to shiver from a cold, ticklish feeling that ran over him.

"Osip?" he called softly, and after a pause again asked, "Osip, where are you?"

Something struck Sobakin painfully in the knees, the door was thrown open, and Osip, his head held low like a bull's, ran across the room, butted into a sleepy policeman who flopped down like a sack, and disappeared.

"Stop him, stop him," came a number of hurried, frantic voices. The police bustled about in the darkness.

In the distance the cry spread like wildfire: "Stop thief...."

The sergeant ran up, buttoning his tunic as he came.

"Who's escaped?..."

"Osip the horse thief," said Sobakin, "it was my fault...."

The invisible fair was soon in an uproar, lanterns swung low over the ground, there were women's voices and the barking of dogs. Men ran around without knowing where or why and shouting: "He's untied a horse.... Who?... Whose?... Ask him who.... Got away on it.... Riding horses, turn out the mounted men!..."

Mounted men appeared above the crowd as though they had been lifted up and pushing the people aside they raced for the town, the river, the steppes....

Sobakin himself hastily saddled his horse and galloped past the carts following the sound of hoofs and retreating voices.

His horse's hoofs beat the ground sharply and rhythmically, the warm wind sang in his ears, the shouts of invisible men arose and died out again.... Somebody rode across his path shouting: "We'll catch him, he won't get away!"

Ahead of him the sound of the hoofbeats seemed to grow softer and the voices louder....

Leaping over ditches and grunting, the hack galloped on until suddenly it pulled up short on the edge of a cliff, not far from the mounted police. Sobakin could hear voices.

"The river, boys, turn back."

"We'll get across."

"Break your neck on the cliff...."

Then from a distance away to the right came the shouts and hoofbeats again.

Sobakin turned his horse and chased after this second group of shouting horsemen.

"Have you caught him?" he asked.

The men laughed loudly in answer:

"A calf, master, we caught it, it's panting and scared to death, all in a sweat...."

"Huh, what hunters you all are!"

"He got away, he's smart," answered the men respectfully.

The horse was pumping badly and Sobakin rode slowly away from the horsemen along the river.

There was a warm wind blowing, carrying with it the fragrance of marsh flowers; from a distance a long drawn out animal scream was carried by the wind, then silence.

"What's that?" shouted Sobakin involuntarily, straining his ears to listen; the shriek was not repeated but he felt a dull pain in his heart.

Sobakin was already asleep, dead tired from all that had happened, when somebody knocked loudly at the door.

"Your Excellency," he said, "they've brought Oska."

Half-asleep, Sobakin jumped out of bed trying to understand what the man was saying....

"They've brought Oska," repeated the policeman, in a strange voice....

"I'll come straight away. wait a minute, but no, you may go...."

As he walked out into the open Sobakin realized that a

misfortune had occurred. There was a strong sour smell in the local lock-up and on the floor beside the stove lay a body covered with a bast mat....

A policeman squatting beside the body spoke in tones of pity.

"Our peasants have beaten him up, listen how he gasps.... Oh, it's terrible...."

Sobakin threw back the matting. Osip lay on his side, his bare, grazed knees drawn up to his stomach, gasping for breath, glassy eyes gazing through half-closed lids.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Sobakin with a slight shudder, afraid that he had guessed right....

Osip's bare buttocks were smeared with mud and blood and a piece of wood projected for several inches.

"What's that?" asked Sobakin in a high-pitched scream.

Osip threw his grey face still farther back and quickly licked his dry, cracked lips....

One of his arms was broken and hung loosely, the other, all blue, gripped tightly at his buttocks.

Holding on to the wall Sobakin made his way to the outer room, a sickness rose to his throat, everywhere he could smell that strong, sour odour which reminded him of a grouse that had been brought down with its intestines torn out by the shot....

"That's how they give them the 'Turkish punishment,'" said the police sergeant, rubbing his stiff whiskers. "Very unpleasant.... Osip admitted the theft, asked us to release your coachman, says he wasn't mixed up in the theft, and he told us where your horse was...."

"I don't care about the horse, oh, why did I start all this?" said Sobakin.

"Why, it's not your fault, the peasants have been awaiting their chance for a long time. Believe me, even we were scared of Osip.... And your horse is in the steppe, the Cossack Zavyrykin has him."

Old Zavorykin did not come out for a long time. Exhausted by the day's ride and the excitement of the previous day Sobakin walked up and down the stuffy room, his ears were ringing and he felt sick from the dust that filled his throat and nose.

"I'll simply tell him the whole story and of course the old man will hand over the horse," muttered Sobakin.

The flyblown lamp over the table stank terribly....

"Oh, hell, I'll be gassed by that thing; why doesn't the old man come? And suppose he gets wild, he's self-willed enough; of course he was just boasting about the wells, but I'll have to approach the matter tactfully, slowly. Oh, hell, how that lamp stinks...."

"Good evening, master," said Zavorykin suddenly in a loud bass—he was standing in the doorway beating the top of his boot with a whip—"Have you come for the horse?"

"No, I don't insist, I don't insist at all," simpered Sobakin. "You already know what a funny thing happened."

"A funny thing, but I don't know who's going to laugh," said Zavorykin.

Silently, never taking his eyes off him, he walked up to Sobakin and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You pup!" he shouted suddenly.

He raised the whip over his head.

"I'll not permit you," Sobakin tried to scream; there was a sickly smell of dust and sourness, green circles swam before his eyes, his throat turned cold and he dropped full length, stretching out like a child on the cold floor....

Sobakin regained consciousness lying in bed in the outer room and the first thing he saw was Zavorykin's profile, gaunt and clear-cut under knitted brows, bending over him.... Sobakin groaned and shifted away from him deeper into the bed.

The old man leaned over him.

"Come to...." he whispered. "Turned out badly, the devil led me astray, thought you'd come to disgrace me, and you, I see, are as simple-minded as a little child. Master, forgive

me, I'm proud, I got angry because I was mortally insulted, I could have killed you and nobody would have known. . . . And you, I see, are simple. . . ."

The old man shook his head and his dark eyes had a kindly look in them.

Sobakin held out his hand.

"I am not angry."

Zavorykin stroked his head.

"Christ looks down on us and is filled with joy. That's the way to live and we don't live like that. no. . . ."

Zavorykin kept talking for a long time, hazily, sternly, earnestly. . . .

"All right, master, sleep. You can go home later in the day tomorrow; by that time they'll have brought your stallion in from the grazing herd. God forbid that I should take money from you; and that hack of yours is tired, you can take mine, I don't ride him very often. . . ."

III

Alexandra Apollonovna was cutting the pages of a magazine; the drawing room fires had been lit for the first time that day and the broad backs of the old armchairs possessed all the allurements of autumn leisure. The room smelled of coffee.

The high-school boy was sitting on the window sill idly dangling his legs. The miserable garden looked quite helpless in the endless rain.

"Tell us about your adventures," he said insistently to Sobakin.

"I've told you everything, what else. . . ."

"Volodya, don't bother Mr. Sobakin," said his grandmother sternly, looking over her glasses at Sobakin, who was sorting grains of wheat on a sheet of clean paper.

"Poor grain," said Sobakin. "What else can I tell you?"

"Something about that coachman whom they took away that time—he's awfully mysterious."

"Oh, Arkhip..." smiled Sobakin, "a mystery indeed."

"But really, what has happened to him, did they release him?" asked Alexandra Apollonovna.

"I think so. I went to the town, tried to intercede but they told me they couldn't release him without a trial—I think it was held a few days ago..."

"I never liked that Arkhip of yours, he's bad tempered and he has an evil eye, he comes over here and wanders round the stables peering at things and afterwards something always happens..."

"Belyachok had malanders on the fetlocks, remember, Grandma?" the boy put in.

"Yes, Belyachok had malanders; no, no I don't like people like that, you should have let him stay in prison. I'm not sure he's innocent," the old lady took off her glasses. "Before you came to the village he beat up my inspector just because he would not allow him to drive his cart through the corn—just imagine, he deliberately drove his cart through the corn..."

"I remember," said the boy, "how they brought the inspector here, it was ghastly: his head was dangling and flies were crawling over his face."

"Strange," drawled Sobakin, "Arkhip has never been quarrelsome, always obedient, quiet... Although there was one strange incident... D'you remember last year I drove away from here in the evening, that was when Father Ivan had been impersonating a turkey; I don't know why but instead of going the usual way we drove straight across the pasturelands and behind the boundary post there's a deep ditch; I said to Arkhip that the night was dark and that he should remember the drop on the left. But he just urged the horses on. 'Steady, Arkhip,' I said. I knew that we were right on top of the ditch but he did not seem to be able to hold the horses..."

"Horrible," shuddered Chembulatova, "and what next?"

"The horses themselves turned suddenly. 'What are you doing?' I shouted, and he turned round and said in a dull voice, 'God saved us, master, God kept us out of danger!'"

"So there you are, I told you so, tomorrow I'll order them to fence off that place..."

"All the same I think that was just an accident; what have I or my horses done to him? And then he could have killed himself."

"Landless peasants like Arkhip who have no families are capable of anything, they have the devil in them. He works for you and everything seems all right—he's moody and silent and then suddenly he goes and sets fire to your house..."

"Grandma, look, the weather's clearing up," shouted Volodya and before his grandmother had time to say a word he threw open the balcony door and a fresh breeze, carrying with it the scents of damp earth and leaves, burst into the room, rustled the leaves of her book, and splashed raindrops on it; the sun, peeping out through breaks in the clouds cast its rays on the raindrops, the windowpanes and the yellow foliage..."

The door was closed and there was a clatter of crockery in the dining room.

"Never mind about the Arkhips," said Alexandra Apollonovna, sailing into the dining room, "you only get upset and the cause of it all is that the peasants are not properly looked after. The peasant reverts to his primitive savage state..."

Sobakin recalled a newspaper story that he had read a month before in a St. Petersburg left-wing newspaper that accidentally came his way, but he didn't want to think about it, it was warmer and cosier as it was.

Towards evening the wind died down, the low sun tinged the leaden clouds hanging close to the earth a deep red and, spreading its pale wings far over the wet yellow steppe as though in farewell, sank behind the horizon.

The burdocks on the dark mounds were still clearly visible and the puddles on the shiny surface of the road turned a dull violet.

The rattling wheels splashed fresh mud into his face, spattering his hands and the reins.

Sobakin unfastened his leather coat and sat bouncing up and down on the seat wrapt in thought.

"Here they are, these expanses of steppeland, untraveled roads, forgotten burial mounds. There is no end to them and the villages are just as grey and forgotten, the people in them are like grass, untalkative, God alone knows what they live for, from one generation to another without change, like wild rye."

Boredom, the sister of the autumn wind, went from road to road, from mound to mound, over the ploughlands and through the villages singing doleful songs....

The iron tyres of the wheels rattled on the road, the horse's hoofs beat the ground and slipped as they went downhill....

The gig rolled and jolted into a ditch, the horse slipped and fell on its knees.

"It's hard for an unshod horse to pull up the slope," thought Sobakin and slapped the animal with his reins....

Behind him he could hear frequent short steps as though someone were trying to overtake him in silence....

Sobakin turned his head: a peasant, dimly visible in the darkness of the hollow, was running after him waving his left hand.

"Strange," thought Sobakin and still not understanding that which was quite obvious he lashed the horse smartly with the whip.

The man was overtaking him, it was easier to run on the grass, it was not so slippery.

"The devil alone knows what sort of a chase this is, what does he want?" thought Sobakin and rising from his seat he lashed the horse with the whip. The horse leaped into its collar,

slipped, reared up on its hinds and dragged the gig up on to level ground.

"Hi!" shouted the peasant sharply and suddenly started back.

"Arkhip! Is it you?"

"Hi!" shouted Arkhip again, stopped short in his run, raised his hand and threw a bright gleaming axe, his body bent forward, waiting.... The axe struck the bottom board of the box heavily and fell at Sobakin's feet.

"What's the matter with you, have you gone out of your mind?..." shouted Sobakin, pulling in his horse. Arkhip followed along behind.

"Now you can do what you like with me," said Arkhip, watching the crimson strip of sunset, grey-haired, the wind ruffling his clothes and hair.

"What are you trying to kill me for, Arkhip? I haven't done anything, Arkhip...."

"You killed my son."

"What son?"

"Osip...."

The strip of sunset turned darker, grew narrower and closed its crimson eyelid.

Sobakin moved on at a walk, Arkhip walking to the side and a little behind him.

"Arkhip, I'll say nothing about this to anybody, but swear that it will never happen again. Listen, Arkhip. The peasants killed Osip, I would never have allowed it."

Arkhip laughed softly, like a wild horse neighing. and Sobakin saw his white teeth for the first time.

IV

Over a year passed. The new summer, scorching the earth, had clothed it with a coat of gold, the grain had been harvested and the barns smelled of fresh straw; every day the threshing

machine rattled away until sundown; at dawn there was a ground frost that fled at the first sight of the sun; and only in the dark garden and on the meadow where the shadow of the house fell, the tiny sorrel leaves gleamed silver.

In the morning the peasants again came to Sobakin to lodge a complaint against Arkhip.

All the summer Arkhip had given them no rest; he drove their cattle into the master's cowshed when they grazed it on the master's land, when a labourer cut grass for himself from the master's field he would take it away, besides grabbing the culprit's cap—come and complain, he would say, and bring the fine with you.

And as to the grain—not a sheaf of it did they see until the last kopek was paid into the office. Arkhip had become such a zealous steward that one wondered where all his viciousness had come from.

The peasants wanted to beat him up but he either evaded them or put the blame on the master—said it was not his doing but the master's. The peasants kept their wrath secret and in the autumn when the master's fields produced ten bushels of grain for every three produced in the peasants' own fields, they decided, each by himself, to set fire to the master's barn.

That was the tradition handed down by the old men.

In addition to this the "golden charter" had come to the village—nobody had read it, nobody had seen it, but then everybody knew what was written in it; the document was an old one, it had been traveling the earth for a long time.

After the charter came leaflets; they were read and the people were seething with excitement in a dull sort of way, like an underground spring.

"Well, Arkhip, and how are the peasants?" asked Sobakin, yawning, as he gave his instructions for the next day.

Arkhip shrugged his shoulders.

"How are they, fools..."

"This morning they came again to complain about you,

you can't keep on like this, Arkhip, you'll spoil my relations with the people."

"You can't handle the peasant any other way—press him hard and he'll do whatever you like for you and if you say a good word to him he'll hang on your neck."

"I've heard they're going to burn me up."

"Who knows?"

"They set fire to Chembulatova's barns."

"That's just mischief. the lady went away to town and they got into mischief."

"All right, you may go Arkhip. And see' to it that the horses are harnessed in the morning."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"To town."

Arkhip went away and Sobakin got into bed; before going to sleep he opened a catalogue of flower and vegetable seeds but soon the flowers all began to look like ladies and then all of them like one and the same lady with an upturned nose; a head of cabbage, shaking itself, put on glasses and turned into old Chembulatova.

Sobakin, half-asleep and smiling, thought how good it was that he, so strong and young, would again soon see those flashing eyes, little snub nose and golden hair. . . .

Sobakin was awakened by a loud whisper.

"Master, master, get up."

Sobakin jumped up, his bare feet on the floor, and without understanding anything looked up at the excited Arkhip who was standing in front of him, a candle in his hand.

"What's the matter?"

"The peasants are coming."

"What peasants, where?"

"They're coming here, to you. When I ran here they were already crossing the dam. . . ."

Sobakin listened and looked helplessly at the strong, moody Arkhip.

"Arkhip, what can we do?"

"I've bolted all the doors, master, and you get a gun, we'll have to scare them off."

"There are no shutters on the windows."

With trembling fingers Sobakin rammed cartridges into shotguns which he pulled down from the wall above the bed.

"I'll load them with small shot, I don't want to kill anybody."

"Load 'em with ball, then they won't try it again..."

"Good Lord, what an idea!"

The hum of voices and cries became more audible in the darkness outside, they could even hear individual shouts; suddenly there was silence and the waiting became unbearable....

"What are they doing?" whispered Sobakin.

A windowpane smashed with a loud ring and a stone, falling on the writing desk, overturned a vase of feather grass; cries resounded through the broken windowpane.

"Smash the windows. let him come out."

"Hi, master, come out, we want to talk to you."

"Give us Arkhip..."

Arkhip, nimble and agile, jumped over to the wall, brushed his thick hair out of his eyes and said imperatively:

"Put the light out, master..."

Sobakin blew the candle out and it was all the more unbearably terrifying as the peasants shouted still more ferociously.

"Come out..."

With a rattle several more windowpanes flew out and Arkhip screamed savagely....

Pressing close to his sweaty back Sobakin whispered to him.

"What's going to happen? My God!"

"If you don't come out we'll fetch you," shouted the peasants and several heads in fur caps appeared at the windows.

"Get in, boys, there's nothing to look at..."

Arkhip fired. . . . Everything immediately became silent. . . . Under the window somebody was groaning, frequently and penetratingly.

The peasants stood back from the house, talked matters over and their disputes became louder and louder.

"Fetch some hay, some straw," shouted several voices.

"Burn him up."

"Smoke the swine out."

"Catch him! Catch him!" came excited shouts.

There was a whine, a trampling of feet and dull blows.

"They're beating up our workers," whispered Arkhip. "Now there's nothing left for us to do but to run into the garden, they're going to set fire to the house. . . ."

"The balcony doors are sealed tight."

Arkhip did not answer but lifted his gun and fired. The shot lit up the walls, the overturned armchair and Sobakin in his nightshirt, without his trousers. . . .

Arkhip fired again without aiming and the acrid smoke filled the room. Sobakin also fired and the gun recoiled and struck him in the shoulder and cheek.

Suddenly a red flame burst out under the window and crackled loudly.

As the light increased the peasants ran off with shouts of joy and a stone struck Sobakin in the face. . . . The wound bled and Sobakin clenched his teeth and groaned. Arkhip pressing Sobakin down to the floor, crawled out into the corridor. A bright light coming through the open doors filled the corridor. . . .

"Now, master," said Arkhip, "I've been wanting to thank you for a long time. . . ." Pushing Sobakin down he sat on his chest and laughed.

"Arkhip, what are you doing, Arkhip?" whispered Sobakin, trying to get free; he tore Arkhip's shirt, scratched his body but Arkhip became like one drunk, fury filling his whole body.

Pressing his knee into Sobakin's throat he pulled out a

jackknife with a bone handle, opened it with his teeth and looking straight into Sohakin's insane white eyes, he drove the knife in.

The house was burning. The peasants, lit up by the flames, stood with serious faces watching the fire devour the dry walls and creep out, smoking, from under the eaves.... Pink-tinged pigeons circled round....

"Look, there's Arkhip in the stables," somebody shouted.

Dragging Wizard by the bridle Arkhip came out and when the shouting peasants ran towards him he threw himself flat across the horse's back and pressing close down on his withers drove him off across the steppe, all lit up in the glow of the fire....

And that was the last that was seen of him....





NIKITA'S CHILDHOOD

To my son NIKITA ALEXEYEVICH TOLSTOY,
with the profoundest respect.

THE AUTHOR

SUNNY MORN

NIKITA sighed as he awoke and opened his eyes. Through the frosty lacework on the windows, through the miraculously painted silver stars and the strange arms of the foliage came the rays of the sun. Inside the room the light was snow white. The sun was reflected from the washbasin in a trembling patch of light on the wall.

As he opened his eyes Nikita remembered that the evening before Pakhom the carpenter had said to him:

"Now I'll smear it and pour water over it and when you get up in the morning you can get aboard and off you go."

The evening before Pakhom, a one-eyed, pock-marked peasant, had made a sled for Nikita at the latter's special request. The sled was made like this.

Standing amidst the curling shavings beside the carpenter's bench in the coach house, Pakhom had planed down two boards and four legs: the lower board was beveled at the leading edge so that it would not bite into the snow; the legs were thinned down at the bottom; in the upper board there were two depressions on the edges for the legs so that the rider could keep his seat. The lower board was smeared with cow dung and then water was poured over it as it stood out in the frost. the

operation being repeated three times; after this the surface was like that of a mirror. A rope was fixed to the upper board to pull the sled by and to steer it with when racing downhill.

The sled would, of course, now be ready and standing at the door. Pakhom was that sort of chap: "If," he would say, "I promise something, my word's as good as law, and I do it."

Nikita sat on the edge of his bed and listened—the house was quiet, nobody, apparently, was up and about yet. If he could dress himself in a minute, naturally without washing or cleaning his teeth, then he would be able to slip out of the back door into the yard. And from the yard it was a stone's throw to the river where the snowdrifts piled up against the steep bank—get on the sled and off. . . .

Nikita slipped off the bed and walked on tiptoe across the sun-warmed squares of the floor. . . .

Just then the door opened and a head with glasses, protruding red eyebrows and a bright red beard looked in. The head winked and said:

"Are you getting up, you young brigand?"

ARKADY IVANOVICH

The man with the red beard—he was Nikita's tutor, Arkady Ivanovich—had been sniffing around since the previous evening and had deliberately got up early. That Arkady Ivanovich was a very smart and cunning fellow. He came into Nikita's room with a knowing smile on his face, went to the window, breathed on the glass and when the frost had melted and the glass was clear, he adjusted his glasses and looked out into the yard.

"There's a fine sled," he said, "standing by the porch."

Nikita did not speak, he only frowned. He had to dress and clean his teeth and wash his face, ears and all and even his neck. After that Arkady Ivanovich took Nikita by the

shoulders and marched him into the dining room. His mother, in a thick grey dress, was seated at the samovar. She took hold of Nikita's face, with her clear, bright eyes looked into his, and kissed him.

"Did you sleep well, Nikita?"

Then she stretched out her hand to Arkady Ivanovich.

"And how did you sleep, Arkady Ivanovich?" she asked affably.

"As far as sleeping's concerned, well, I slept all right," he answered and laughed into his red moustache for no apparent reason; he sat down to table, poured cream into his tea, took a piece of sugar and placed it between his white teeth and winked at Nikita through his glasses.

Arkady Ivanovich was simply unbearable: he was always jolly, always winking, never said anything straight out, but always left you guessing. For instance when Mamma asked quite plainly how he had slept he answered: "As far as sleeping's concerned, well, I slept all right"—from which it was to be understood: "And that Nikita wanted to run away from breakfast and lessons to the river, and yesterday Nikita instead of doing his German translation sat on Pakhom's bench for two hours."

Arkady Ivanovich never made complaints, it is true, but Nikita always had to keep his ears open.

At breakfast Mamma said that there had been a heavy frost during the night and that the water barrel in the passage was frozen and that when Nikita went out he was to wear his Cossack hood.

"But Mamma, honestly, it's terribly hot," said Nikita.

"Please put on the hood."

"It tickles my cheeks and it stifles me, Mamma, I'll catch a worse cold in the hood."

Mamma looked at Arkady Ivanovich and at Nikita and when she spoke her voice trembled.

"You're so disobedient, I don't know whom you take after."

"Let's get to our lessons," said Arkady Ivanovich, rubbing his hands as though there were no greater pleasure in the world than solving problems in arithmetic and dictating proverbs and sayings that sent you to sleep.

In the big, empty, white room, with a map of the two hemispheres hanging from the wall, Nikita sat down at a table that was covered with inkstains and drawings of ugly faces, and Arkady Ivanovich opened the arithmetic book.

"Where did we get to?" he said briskly. With a finely pointed pencil he marked the number of the problem.

"A merchant sold several yards of blue cloth at 3 rubles 64 kopeks a yard and some black cloth..." read Nikita. Immediately, as was usually the case, he imagined that merchant from the arithmetic book. He was in a long, dusty frockcoat, had a sour-looking yellow face, dull, flat and dried up. The shop was as dark as a cave: on a dusty flat shelf lay two pieces of cloth: the merchant stretched out his skinny hands, took the cloth from the shelf and looked at Nikita with dull, lifeless eyes.

"Well, what do you think, Nikita?" asked Arkady Ivanovich. "Altogether the merchant sold 18 yards. How much blue cloth and how much black did he sell?"

Nikita frowned, the merchant was squashed flat, the two pieces of cloth disappeared in the wall and rolled up in the dust...

"Ai-ai-ai," said Arkady Ivanovich and began to explain. wrote some figures rapidly with his pencil, multiplied and divided, repeating to himself: "Carry one, carry two." It seemed to Nikita that during multiplication this "Carry One," or "Carry Two," jumped up from the paper into his head and tickled his brain so that he would not forget them. This was a very unpleasant idea. And the sun that was sparkling on the two frost-bound windows of the classroom was calling all the time "Come to the river."

At last the arithmetic lesson was finished and the dictation began. Arkady Ivanovich walked up and down along the wall

and in a special sleepy sort of voice, a voice that nobody ever uses for speaking, began his dictation:

"All the animals on earth are constantly at labour, working. The pupil was obedient and industrious...."

Sticking out the tip of his tongue Nikita began to write, the pen scratched and splashed.

Suddenly a door slammed somewhere in the house and he could hear the sound of frozen felt boots going down the passage. Arkady Ivanovich lowered his book and listened. Mamma's merry voice exclaimed not very far away:

"Have you brought the mail?"

Nikita dropped his head right into his exercise-book, suppressing his laughter.

"Obedient and industrious," he repeated in a singsong voice. "I've written 'industrious.'"

Arkady Ivanovich adjusted his glasses.

"Hmm. All the animals on earth are obedient and industrious.... What are you laughing at?... Made a blot?... By the way, we'll have a short rest now."

Arkady Ivanovich, pressing his lips together, menaced him with a long forefinger that looked like a pencil and went rapidly out of the classroom. In the passage he spoke to Mamma.

"Alexandra Leontievna, is there a letter for me?"

Nikita guessed whom he expected a letter from. There was, however, no time to waste. Nikita put on a short sheepskin jacket, felt boots and cap, threw the hood behind the chest of drawers so that it would not be found and ran out to the porch.

SNOWDRIFTS

The extensive yard was covered with soft, white, scintillating snow broken by deep blue human footprints and the frequent tracks of a dog. The air was brisk and frosty, tickled his nose and pricked his cheeks like needles. The coach house, sheds and

farmyard wore heavy white caps and seemed to be closer to the earth as though they had grown into the snow. The tracks left by sleigh runners ran like two strips of glass across the whole yard.

Nikita ran down the crunchy steps from the porch. At the bottom stood a brand new pinewood sled with a coil of bast rope on it. Nikita looked at it—it was solidly made, he tried it—it slid easily; he slung the sled over his shoulder, took up a spade which he thought he might need and ran down the path the whole length of the garden to the dam. There stood huge willow trees—they reached almost to the sky—all laden with hoarfrost so that each branch looked as though it were made of snow.

Nikita turned to the right, towards the river, and tried to keep to the road, walking in other people's footprints and in places where the snow was untrampled going backwards in order to deceive Arkady Ivanovich.

On the steep banks of the Chagry River huge fluffy snow-drifts had piled up during the past few days. In some places they formed promontories that jutted out into the river. If you stood on one of these promontories the snow would pull away, collapse and the whole snow mountain would go tumbling down in a cloud of white powder.

To the right the river wound away like a dark-blue shadow between white, deserted fields. To the left, on the slope of the high bank, stood the dark cottages of the village of Sosnovka, the long poles over the wells sticking up between them. Wafts of blue smoke rose high above the roofs and melted in the air. On the snowy cliff, marred with yellow patches of ash that the housewives had raked out of their stoves that morning, a number of tiny figures were moving. These were Nikita's pals, the small boys from "our end" of the village. Farther on, where the river bent away, there were more boys, the Konchan crowd, a dangerous gang. Nikita threw down the spade, dropped the sled on to the snow, sat on the seat, took a firm hold of the rope, kicked

off with his feet a couple of times and the sled flew away downhill of its own volition. The wind whistled in his ears and powdered snow rose in clouds on either side of him. Down, down, he went, swift as an arrow. Quite suddenly, where the snow came to an end over the river, the sled flew into the air and landed on the ice. Gradually it slowed down and then came to a stop.

Nikita laughed, climbed off the sled and dragged it up the hill, up to his knees in snow. When he reached the bank he saw the black figure of Arkady Ivanovich, looking bigger than life size, coming across the white field. Nikita grabbed the spade, jumped on the sled, flew down the bank and then ran across the ice to where the snowdrifts jutted out into the river.

At the snow cape Nikita immediately began to dig a cave—it was an easy job for the spade cut the snow like butter. When he had a big enough hole, he dragged the sled inside and from within began filling up the entrance with lumps of snow. When the wall was built right up there was a faint blue light inside the cave and it was very pleasant and comfortable.

Nikita sat and thought that not one of the boys had such a wonderful sled. He got out his penknife and began to carve a name on the upper board—"Vevit."

"Nikita! Where have you got to?" he heard Arkady Ivanovich's voice.

Nikita put his knife back in his pocket and looked out through a chink between the lumps of snow. Below him Arkady Ivanovich stood on the ice peering round.

"Where are you, you young brigand?"

Arkady Ivanovich adjusted his glasses and came towards the cave but immediately sank into the snow up to his waist.

"Come on out, I'll drag you out, anyway!"

Nikita did not answer, Arkady Ivanovich tried to climb higher but again sank into the snow; he put his hands in his pockets and said:

"If you don't want to, then you needn't. Stay where you are. Your mother has just got a letter from Samara. . . . All right, good-bye, I'm going back. . . ."

"What letter?" asked Nikita.

"Ah, so you are here!"

"Tell me who the letter was from?"

"About some people coming for the holidays."

Lumps of snow immediately began to fly and Nikita's head appeared out of the cave. Arkady Ivanovich laughed heartily.

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER

Mother read the letter at last while they were at lunch. The letter was from his father.

"Dear Sasha, I have bought the thing we decided to present to a certain boy who in my opinion hardly deserves to have such nice things given to him." On hearing these words Arkady Ivanovich began winking violently. "It is quite a big present so send an extra sleigh for it. There's another piece of news—Anna Appollosovna Babkina intends to come to us for the holidays with her children. . . ."

"There's nothing more of interest," said Mamma and in answer to all Nikita's questions simply closed her eyes and said:

"I don't know anything."

Arkady Ivanovich also kept silent, waved his hands and said he didn't know anything. In general Arkady Ivanovich was excessively happy that whole day, absent-mindedly gave wrong answers, and kept pulling a note out of his pocket, reading a few lines and screwing up his mouth. Apparently he had a secret of his own.

At dusk Nikita ran across the yard to the workers' quarters where two frozen windows cast a pale blue light on the snow. The workers were at supper. Nikita whistled three times,

A minute later his closest friend, Mishka Koryashonok, came out wearing enormous felt boots and no cap and a sheepskin jacket thrown over his shoulders. Behind the corner of the building Nikita told him in a whisper about the letter and asked him what they were bringing from town.

Mishka Koryashonok, his teeth chattering from the cold, said:

"Something awfully big, burst my eyes. I'm running back, it's cold. Listen, we're going to beat up the Konchan gang in the village tomorrow. Coming?"

"All right."

Nikita went back home and sat down to read *The Headless Horseman*.

Mamma and Arkady Ivanovich sat at the round table under the big lamp each with a book. A cricket was chirping—trr-trr-trr—behind a big stove. The floor boards in the next room creaked in the dark.

The Headless Horseman galloped across the prairie, brushing aside the high grass; a red moon rose over the lake. Nikita felt that the hair on the back of his neck was twitching. He turned round warily—a greyish shadow passed across the black window. Honestly, he saw it. Mamma raised her head from her book.

"The wind has risen this evening, there'll be a blizzard."

THE DREAM

Nikita had a dream—he had dreamed it several times and it was always the same.

Easily and soundlessly the door of the drawing room opened. On the floor lay the bluish reflections of the windows. Outside the black windows hung the moon—a huge ball of light. Nikita climbed on to the card table that stood between the two windows and this is what he saw,

On the opposite wall, white as chalk, the round pendulum swaying back and forth in a tall clockcase was gleaming in the darkness. On the wall above the clock hung the framed portrait of a stern-looking old man with a pipe, beside him an old woman in cap and shawl—she looked down with tightly pressed lips. Along the wall, from the clock to the corner, four striped armchairs, their arms outstretched, squatted each on its four legs. A low bandy-legged sofa stood huddled in the corner. They sat there, without faces or eyes staring at the moon, not stirring a bit.

A cat crawled out from under the fringe of the sofa. It stretched, jumped on to the sofa, and walked along it, black and lean. It walked with its tail down. From the sofa it jumped on to a chair, walked across the chairs by the wall, bending down and passing under the arms. It walked to the last of the chairs, jumped on to the floor and sat down in front of the clock, its back to the windows. The pendulum swung back and forth, the old man and the old woman looked sternly at the cat. Then the cat stood up on its hind legs, rested one paw on the clockcase and with the other tried to stop the pendulum. There was no glass in the clockcase. The cat's paw almost touched the pendulum.

Oh, if he could only shout Nikita, however, cannot move a finger—he cannot budge, it is fearsome, terrible and soon it will be worse....

The moonlight lay immobile in long rectangles on the floor. Everything in the room was silent, sitting back on its haunches. The cat stretched and stretched, bent its head, pressed its ears back and reached the pendulum with its paw. Nikita knew that if the paw touched the pendulum it would stop and at that moment everything would collapse, fall apart with a rattle and clatter and disappear like dust and there would be no drawing room and no moonlight.

Fear made sharp splinters of glass rattle in Nikita's head and sent shivers over his whole body like sand pouring on it. . . .

Mustering all his strength Nikita threw himself on to the floor with a shriek of despair! And the floor suddenly dropped away beneath him. Nikita sat up. He looked round. In the room there were two frosted windows and through them he could see a strange moon, bigger than usual. On the floor stood a pot and his boots.

"Oh Lord, Glory be to God!" said Nikita, hurriedly crossing himself and pushing his head under the pillow. The pillow was soft and warm and packed tight with dreams.

No sooner had he closed his eyes when he could see himself standing on the table in that room again. The pendulum was swinging in the moonlight, the old man and woman were looking down sternly. Again the cat's head appeared from under the sofa. But Nikita had already stretched out his hand, pushed himself off the table and jumped and, his legs moving rapidly, he either flew or floated above the floor. It was exceedingly pleasant to fly about the room. When his feet touched the floor he flapped his arms and slowly rose up to the ceiling and now flew in irregular jerks along the walls. Close to his very nose was the plaster cornice of the room, on it thick, grey dust that had a cosy smell about it. Then he saw a well-known crack in the wall that looked like the Volga on the map and then an old and very strange nail with a piece of string hanging from it on which dead flies were clustered.

Nikita kicked his foot against the wall and slowly flew across the room to the clock. On the top of the clockcase stood a bronze vase in the bottom of which lay something, he could not make out what. Suddenly a voice seemed to whisper in Nikita's ear: "Take what's there."

Nikita flew to the clock and thrust his hand in the vase. The angry old woman immediately leaned out of her picture on the wall and seized his head in her thin hands. He tore himself away from her but behind him the old man leaned out of the other picture, waved his long pipe and struck Nikita on the back so adroitly that he flew to the floor, gasped and opened his eyes.

The sun sparkled and shone through the frost designs on the windows. Near the bed stood Arkady Ivanovich, shaking Nikita by the shoulder.

"Get up, get up, it's nine o'clock," he said.

When Nikita sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes, Arkady Ivanovich winked several times and rubbed his hands in glee.

"Today, my young friend, there will be no lessons."

"Why?"

"Because why ends in Y. For two weeks you can run around with your tongue hanging out. Get up."

Nikita jumped out of bed and danced on the warm floor.

"Christmas holidays!" He had completely forgotten that today was the beginning of the long and merry fortnight's holiday. As he danced in front of Arkady Ivanovich, Nikita forgot something else—his dream, the vase on the clock and the voice that had whispered in his ear: "Take what's there."

THE OLD HOUSE

Nikita was confronted with fourteen whole days of his own—he could do what he liked. It was even a bit boring.

At breakfast he made a pap of tea, milk, bread and jam and ate so much of it that he had to sit quietly for a time. He gazed at his reflection in the samovar and was surprised that he had such a long, ugly face, a face as long as the samovar was high. Then he thought that if he took a teaspoon and broke it, one piece would make a boat and the other piece would do for a digger, to dig at something or other.

"It's time you went out to play, Nikita," said his mother at last.

Nikita dressed slowly and rubbing his finger along the plastered wall went the whole length of the corridor where the stoves smelt warm and cosy. To the left of this long corridor, on the southern side, were the winter rooms, heated

and habitable. To the right, on the northern side, were the five summer rooms, half empty, with the drawing room in the centre. Here there were huge tiled stoves that were only heated once a week. The crystal chandeliers were wrapped in gauze and on the floor there was a heap of apples—the sweet, slightly putrid smell of them filled the whole of the summer section of the house.

With difficulty Nikita opened the big, oaken double doors and went on tiptoes through the empty rooms. Through the semi-circular window he could see the garden buried under the snow. The trees stood motionless, their white branches bowed, and lilac bushes on either side of the balcony staircase were bent low under the load of snow. The tracks of a hare showed up clearly in the field. Right beside the window a big-headed crow that looked like a devil sat on a branch. Nikita tapped at the window and the crow side-stepped and then flew off, brushing the snow from the branch with its wings.

Nikita reached the last corner room. Here dust-covered cupboards stood in a row along the wall and through their glass doors he could see the bindings of old books. Over the tiled fireplace hung the portrait of an extremely beautiful woman. She was dressed in a black velvet riding habit and her gloved hand held a riding whip. She seemed to be walking along and to have turned round to look at Nikita with a merry twinkle in her big, penetrating eyes.

Nikita sat down on the sofa and resting his chin in his fists looked at the lady. He could sit for a long time and look at her like that. On account of her—he had heard it several times from his mother—his great-grandfather had suffered some terrible misfortunes. The portrait of the unfortunate great-grandfather hung over the bookcases—he was a skinny old man with a sharp nose and deep-sunken eyes; he held a beringed hand pressed to the breast of a dressing gown; by his side lay a half-unrolled papyrus and a quill pen. Every-

thing pointed to the fact that he was a very unhappy old man.

Mamma had told him that his great-grandfather used to sleep during the day and at night he used to read and write: he went out to walk only at dusk. At night watchmen walked round the house sounding their rattles so that the night birds would not fly under the windows and scare great-grandfather. It is said that in those days the garden was overgrown with thick, tall grass. All the house, except these rooms, was locked up and was not inhabited. The household servants had run away. Great-grandfather's affairs were in a piteous state.

One day he was not to be found in his study, in the house or in the gardens—they searched for him a whole week but could not find him. Five years later his heir received a strange letter which he sent from Siberia: "I sought tranquility in wisdom and found oblivion in nature."

The cause of all these strange happenings was the lady in the riding habit. Nikita looked at her curiously and excitedly.

The crow again appeared outside the window, disturbed the snow as it alighted on the branch, dipped its head, opened its bill and cawed. This gave Nikita a feeling of awe. He left the empty rooms and ran out into the yard.

AT THE WELL

At the well in the middle of the yard, where the snow was yellow, trampled and frozen hard, Nikita found Mishka Koryashonok. Mishka sat on the edge of the well and was dipping the end of a leather mitten which he wore on his hand in the water.

Nikita asked him why he was doing it.

"All the Konchan boys dip mittens in water and we're going to do it too," answered Mishka Koryashonok. "They get

hard and are awfully good to fight with. Are you going to the village?"

"When?"

"We'll have dinner and then go. But don't tell your mother."

"Mamma lets me go out but told me not to fight."

"What d'you mean, not to fight? And if some one goes for you? I'll tell you who'll go for you—Styopka Karnaushkin. He'll give you what for and down you'll go."

"Ugh, I can manage Styopka," said Nikita, "I can fix him with my little finger." He showed Mishka his finger.

Koryashonok looked at it, spat and said in a rough voice:

"Styopka Karnaushkin's fist has been bewitched. Last week he went to Utyovka with his father for salt and fish and there he had his fist bewitched—may my eyes burst if I tell a lie."

Nikita pondered over that—of course it would be better not to go to the village at all but then Mishka would call him a coward.

"And how was his fist bewitched?" he asked.

Mishka spat again.

"Easy as anything. First you take soot and rub it on your hand then you say three times: 'Tanny-banny, what's under us, under the iron posts?' And that's all..."

Nikita looked admiringly at Koryashonok. Just then the yard gates opened with a creak and sheep ran out in a solid grey mass—their hoofs rattling like castanets, their tails wagging and droppings falling. The flock of sheep swarmed around the well. Bleating and pushing each other the sheep scrambled up to the well, broke the thin ice with their muzzles, drank and coughed. A dirty, long-wooled ram stared at Mishka with his white spotted eyes, stamped his feet and Mishka said to him: "Lazybones"—the ram ran at him and Mishka just managed to jump across the well. Nikita and Mishka ran across the yard jeering at the ram. The ram started after them, thought

better of it and bleated as though it were saying: "Lazybones yourselves."

When Nikita was called from the back porch to come in to lunch Mishka Koryashonok said:

"See you don't let us down—we're going to the village!"

THE BATTLE

Nikita and Mishka Koryashonok took the short road to the village across the garden and the pond. Where the wind had blown the snow off the ice Mishka stopped for a minute, took out his penknife and a box of matches, sat down, sniffed around for a bit and then began to dig into the blue ice where there was a white bubble in it. These bubbles were called "cats"—they were formed by swamp gases that rose from the bottom of the pond and froze into the ice as bubbles. Mishka cut through the ice till he reached the bubble then struck a match and held it to the gas well; a yellowish flame that burnt silently rose over the ice.

"Don't tell anybody about it," said Mishka, "and next week we'll go down to the lower pond and set light to the cats, there's one there I know—as big as a house—it'll burn a whole day."

The boys ran across the pond, scrambled through the flattened yellow reeds on the far bank and reached the village.

There had been a lot of snow that winter. Where the wind blew freely between the houses there was little snow, but at the sides of the houses, where there was no wind, it had piled up to the roofs.

The hut of the crazy, landless peasant Savoska was completely buried, only the chimney sticking out of the snow. Mishka said that three days before the whole village had turned out to dig Savoska out of the snow but he, the fool, when he was snowed under at night had lit the stove, made himself some

vegetable soup without meat, had eaten it and then climbed up on the stove to sleep. They found him asleep on the stove, had awakened him and pulled his ears for his foolishness.

The village was empty and quiet, smoke curled lazily from some of the chimneys. A hazy sun hung low over the white plain and over the snow-covered haystacks and roofs. Nikita and Mishka went to the cottage of Artamon Tyurin, a formidable-looking peasant that everybody in the village feared, so strong and ill-tempered was he; Nikita peeped in at the little window and saw Artamon's stiff beard—like a red bass broom—he was sitting at the table eating something out of a wooden bowl. At the other window three freckled boys, Artamon's sons, Syomka, Lyonka and Artamoshka Junior, stood with their noses pressed against the glass.

When Mishka approached the cottage he whistled and Artamon turned round, his big jaws busily chewing, and threatened him with a spoon. The three boys disappeared from the window and immediately appeared on the porch, tying their sheepskin coats on with girdles.

"Ugh, you," said Mishka, pushing his cap over one ear, "ugh, you, girls. . . . Sitting at home . . . scared. . . ."

"We ain't scared of anything," answered one of the freckle-faces—Syomka.

"Papa says we mustn't wear our felt boots out," said Lyonka.

"I went out before and shouted at the Konchan gang but they didn't take any notice," said Artamoshka Junior.

Mishka pushed his cap on to the other ear, clicked his tongue and spoke in tones of decision.

"Come on, we'll razz 'em. We'll show 'em."

The freckle-faces answered: "All right," and all together they climbed up a huge snowdrift that lay across the street—from here, beyond Artamon's cottage, the "other end" of the village began.

Nikita thought that there must be crowds of boys on the

Konchan side of the drift but there were only two little girls, wrapped in shawls, who pulled a sled up the drift, got on to it and, sticking their felt-booted feet out in front, seized the rope and with squeaks raced across the street past the barn and then down the steep bank on to the ice of the river.

Mishka, and with him the freckle-faces and Nikita, began shouting from their position on the snowdrift.

"Hi, Konchan!"

"We're after you!"

"You're all scared and hiding!"

• "Come on out, we'll bash you!"

"Come out, we'll fight you one-handed, hi, Konchan!" shouted Mishka, slapping his leather mittens.

Four Konchan boys appeared on the other side of the drift. Slapping their mittens and smoothing them by rubbing them up and down on their sides, they straightened their caps and also began to shout.

"Fat lot we care for you!"

"I think you can scare us!"

"Froggie, froggie, kva, kva. kva!"

The gang came up from Nikita's side of the drift—Alyoshka, Nil and Vanka, the Chernoukhov boys, Savoska's nephew Petrushka and another tiny little boy with a big stomach, his mother's shawl on his head with the ends crossed on his chest. On the Konchan side there were also another five or six boys.

"Hi, you, freckle-mugs," they shouted, "we'll rub the freckles off."

"Cockeyed blacksmiths, shod a mouse!" shouted Mishka Koryashonok from his side.

"Froggie, froggie!"

About forty boys had gathered on the two sides. But nobody seemed anxious to start—they were all scared. They threw snowballs, thumbed their noses. From the far side they shouted "Froggie, froggie," from Nikita's side "Cockeyed

blacksmiths!" Both these were insults. Suddenly a smallish, broad-shouldered, pug-nosed lad appeared amongst the Konchan gang.

"Hi, frogs, come on, one against one!"

This was the famous Styopka Karnaushkin with the bewitched fist.

The Konchan boys threw up their caps and whistled shrilly. On Nikita's side the boys remained silent. Nikita took a good look. The freckled boys stood still and scowled. Alyosha and Vanka—the Chernoukhov boys—moved back, the little boy in mamma's shawl rolled his big round eyes at Karnaushkin and looked ready to cry, Mishka Koryashonok, pulling his homespun girdle down under his stomach, muttered.

"I had 'em tougher than this. It won't be the first time. I don't like beginning but when I get my rag out, I'll give it him, knock his hat ten yards off his block."

Styopka Karnaushkin, seeing that nobody was anxious to fight him, beckoned with his mitten to his side.

"At 'em, boys!"

And the konchan gang with shouts and whistles came racing down the snowdrift.

The freckle-faces got scared and fled, after them ran Mishka, Vanka, the Chernoukhovs and then all the other boys: Nikita fled as well. The small boy in the shawl sat down in the snow and cried.

Our side ran through Artamon's yard and Chernoukhov's and gathered on another drift. Nikita looked back. On the snow lay Alyoshka, Nil and five of our side—some had fallen, some lay down out of sheer fright—you couldn't hit a man lying down.

Nikita stood up: he could have cried for shame: they were all cowards and had been afraid to fight. He stood still, his fists clenched and saw that Styopka Karnaushkin, pug-nosed and big-mouthed, with a lock of hair hanging down from his sheepskin cap, was rushing towards him.

Nikita lowered his head and marching towards him hit Styopka in the chest with all his might. Styopka shook his head, dropped his cap and sat down in the snow.

"Ooh, you, that's enough," he said.

The Konchan boys immediately stopped. Nikita went towards them and they gave way. Out-running Nikita and shouting "We're winning," our crowd fell on the Konchan gang like a solid wall. The Konchaners fled. They chased them through five or six yards until they all lay down.

Nikita went back to his own end of the village, excited, overheated, looking for somebody else to fight. Somebody called him. Behind a barn stood Styopka Karnaushkin. Nikita went up to him and Styopka frowned at him.

"You gave me a good 'un," he said. "Want to make friends?"

"Of course I do," Nikita answered hurriedly.

The boys smiled, looking at each other.

"Let's swop," said Styopka.

"Let's."

Nikita wondered for a minute what was the best thing he could give Styopka, and then gave him his penknife with the four blades. Styopka put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a knucklebone cast from lead.

"Here you are. don't lose it, it's worth a lot."

HOW A DULL EVENING ENDED

That evening Nikita sat looking at the pictures in the *Niva* magazine and reading the legends under them. There was very little of interest.

There was one picture: a woman stood on a doorstep with arms bare to the elbow: she had flowers in her hair; on her shoulders and at her feet were pigeons. A man with a gun over his shoulder was grinning at her from beyond a fence.

The most annoying thing about the picture was that he could not tell why it had been drawn. The explanation said:

"Who of you has not seen tame pigeons, those real friends of man? (Nikita skipped the rest about the pigeons.) Who has not enjoyed throwing grain to these birds in the mornings? The talented German artist, Hans Wurst, has recorded such a moment. Young Elsa, the daughter of a pastor, has come out of the house. The pigeons see their beloved mistress and joyfully fly to her feet. See how one of them is sitting on her shoulder while another eats from her hand. A young neighbour, a sportsman, is secretly admiring the picture."

Nikita would imagine that Elsa had nothing else to do but to feed pigeons—what boredom. Her father, the pastor, would be somewhere in a room, sitting on a chair and yawning from boredom. And the young neighbour is grimacing as though he had a stomach-ache, and he would go down the road, grinning like that, and his gun would not shoot, of course. The sky in the picture was grey and the sunlight was grey.

Nikita sucked the point of his pencil and drew moustaches on the pastor's daughter.

The next picture was a view of the town of Buzuluk: a milestone and a broken wheel by the roadside, and in the distance, board huts, a little church and rain slanting down from heavy clouds.

Nikita yawned and closed *Niva*, leaned on the table and listened.

From the attic above came whistling sounds and a long drawn-out blowing. Then came the heavy bass "oo-oo-oo-oo-oo," drawling, frowning and puffing. Then with a trill the sound changed to a thin, plaintive tone and whistled down one nostril in a tormented voice as thin as a cotton thread. Again the bass came into play together with the puffing.

Over the round table hung a lamp under a white porcelain shade. Somebody walked heavily along the passage on the

other side of the wall—apparently the furnaceman—and the crystal ornaments under the lamp rattled.

Mamma's head was bent over a book, her hair was ash blonde, soft and fine, and curled on her temple where there was a birthmark like a millet seed. From time to time Mamma would cut the pages with a knitting needle. Her book had a brick-coloured cover. The bookcase in Papa's study was full of such books and they were all called *European News*. He wondered how adults could like such boring books: reading a book like that was as bad as rubbing a brick.

On Mamma's lap slept Akhilka, the tame hedgehog, his wet pig's nose resting on his paws. When people went to bed at night he would already have slept his fill and would wander all night about the house, stamping with his claws, grunting and smelling in all the corners, looking into the mouseholes.

On the other side of the wall the furnaceman made a clatter with an iron door and they could hear how he stirred up the fire. The room smelt of warm plaster and washed floors. It was boring but cosy. Up there in the attic there was a great effort at whistling—yuee—yuee—yuee.

"Mamma, who's that whistling?"

Mamma raised her brows but did not look up from her book. Arkady Ivanovich, who was drawing lines in his notebook, seemed only to have been waiting for that question.

"When we speak of an inanimate object," he said with the rapidity of one who has learned something by heart, "we employ the pronoun 'what.'"

"Boo-oo-oo-oo" came the howl from the attic. Mamma raised her head, listened, eased her shoulders and drew her woolen shawl closer about them. The hedgehog woke up and snorted angrily.

Nikita could picture the snow blowing in through the little glassless window of the cold, dark attic. Between the huge ceiling beams, where the doves used to sit, lay with the springs sticking out old broken chairs, armchairs and pieces

of old sofas. On one of these armchairs, close against the chimney sat "wind": hairy, covered in dust and cobwebs. He sat still, his cheeks resting in his hands and howled "Bo-o-o-o-ring." The night was long, the attic cold and he sat there, lonely old soul, and howled.

Nikita slid off his chair and sat down near his mother. She smiled lovingly at him, pulled Nikita towards her and kissed him on the forehead.

"Isn't it time for you to go to bed?"

"Oh, please, another half hour."

Nikita leaned his head on his mother's shoulder. In the depth of the room a door creaked and the cat Vaska appeared ---his tail held high, his whole appearance expressing humility and good will. He opened his pink mouth and mewed so softly it could scarcely be heard. Without raising his eyes from the exercise-book Arkady Ivanovich asked:

"On what business have you come, Vasily Vasilievich?"

Vaska walked over to Mamma, looked at her with his green eyes narrowed to tiny slits and mewed in louder tones. The hedgehog again grunted. Nikita thought that Vaska knew something, that he had come to tell them something.

The wind howled desperately in the attic. Just then there came a subdued shout from outside the windows, there was a crunching of snow and the sound of voices. Mamma got up quickly. Akhilka grunted and rolled off her lap.

Arkady Ivanovich ran to the window and looked out.

"They've come," he exclaimed.

"Good God!" said Mamma excitedly. "Surely that can't be Anna Apollosovna?... In this blizzard..."

A few minutes later, Nikita, who stood in the passage, saw the heavy, felt-covered door open; a cloud of frosty steam rushed in followed by a tall, stout woman in two fur coats and a shawl all covered with snow. She held by the hand a boy in a grey coat with shining buttons and a Cossack hood. Behind them, stamping in his frozen felt boots, came the

coachman with an icy beard, yellow icicles in place of a moustache and white fluffy eyebrows. In his arms he carried a little girl in a goatskin coat with the fur outside. She lay with her eyes closed, her head resting on the coachman's shoulder; her face was sweet and roguish.

As she came in the tall woman exclaimed in a loud bass:

"Alexandra Leontievna, your guests have come," and lifting her hands she began to unwind her shawl. "Don't come near us we'll give you a cold. I must say your roads are just rotten.... Right close to the house we ran into some bushes."

This was Mamma's friend Anna Apollosovna Babkina who lived in Samara. Her son Victor, waiting for somebody to take his hood off, looked frowningly at Nikita. Mamma took the sleeping girl from the coachman, removed her fur hood—a wealth of bright golden locks immediately burst out from it—and kissed her.

"Lilechka, you've arrived"

The girl sighed, opened her big blue eyes and sighed a second time as she woke up.

VICTOR AND LILYA

Nikita and Victor Babkin awoke early next morning in Nikita's room; sitting up in their beds they looked at each other with knitted brows.

"I remember you," said Nikita.

"I remember you very well," answered Victor immediately. "You came to see us in Samara once and you ate so much duck and apple sauce that they gave you castor oil."

"That I don't remember."

"But I do."

The boys sat in silence. Victor deliberately yawned.

"I have a tutor—Arkady Ivanovich," said Nikita carelessly.

"He's awful strict, stuffs me full of knowledge. He can read any book in half an hour."

Victor sneered.

"I'm going to the Gymnasium, the second class. They're so strict there that they keep me without lunch all the time."

"So what of it!" said Nikita.

"It's something. Although I can go a thousand days without eating if I want to."

"Huh," said Nikita, "have you tried?"

"I haven't tried it yet, Mamma won't let me."

Nikita yawned and stretched.

"Day before yesterday I beat Styopka Karnaushkin."

"And who's Styopka Karnaushkin?"

"Strongest kid in the village. I got him such a one—boom, and down he went. I gave him my penknife with four blades and he gave me a lead knucklebone. I'll show you later on."

Nikita slipped out of bed and slowly began to dress himself.

"And I can lift the Makarov Dictionary with one hand," muttered Victor in a voice that trembled from vexation, but it was clear that he was already giving up. Nikita went over to the tiled stove with the sleeping shelf, jumped up on to it without touching it with his hands, lifted up one foot and jumped down to the floor on the other foot.

"If you move your legs fast enough you can fly," he said looking attentively at Victor.

"That's nothing. A lot of boys in our class can fly."

The boys dressed and went down to the dining room where there was a smell of hot bread and buns, where so much steam came from the brightly polished samovar and curled up to the ceiling that the windows were all steamed up. Mamma, Arkady Ivanovich and the girl of yesterday, Lilya—a youngster of about nine and Victor's sister—were already seated at table. From the neighbouring room came the sound of Anna Apollosovna's deep bass: "Please give me a towel."

Lilya was dressed in a white frock with a light blue sash

that was tied behind her in a bow. In her fair hair there was another bow tied butterfly fashion, also light blue.

Nikita went up to her, flushed and bowed. Lilya turned round on her chair, held out her hand and said very seriously:

"Good morning, boy."

As she said those words she raised her upper lip.

It seemed to Nikita that this was not a real girl, she was so pretty, especially her eyes—they were blue and brighter than the ribbons—and her long silky lashes. Lilya, paying no further attention to Nikita, took up a big teacup with both hands and buried her face in it. The boys sat down together. Victor, it seemed, drank tea like a baby—he bent over the cup and sucked tea out of it with his long lips. He secretly piled sugar into his cup until the tea became thick and then asked in a weak voice for water to be added.

"D'you like my sister?" he whispered, nudging Nikita with his knee.

Nikita did not answer but only blushed.

"You be careful with her," whispered Victor, "the kid always goes complaining to Mamma."

In the meantime Lilya had finished her tea, wiped her mouth on a napkin and got down slowly from her chair. She went up to Alexandra Leontievna.

"Thank you, Auntie Sasha," she said politely and punctiliously.

Then she went over to the window, sat down with her feet drawn up under her in a huge brown armchair, got a box of needles and thread from somewhere and settled down to sew. All that Nikita could now see was the huge butterfly bow, two hanging curls and between them the moving tip of a tongue that was stuck out ever so slightly and with which Lilya helped herself along with her sewing.

All Nikita's thoughts were hopelessly mixed up. He began to show Victor how to jump over the back of a chair, but Lilya did not turn her head and Mamma said:

"Children, if you want to make a noise go out into the yard."

The boys got dressed and went out. It was a misty, warm day. The reddish sun hung low over long layers of cloud bank that looked like snow-covered fields. Rosy trees, covered in hoarfrost, stood in the garden. The indistinct shadows on the snow reflected that same warm light. It was unusually calm, the only sound coming from two dogs, Sharok and Katok, who stood side by side near the back porch, their heads turned towards each other, growling. They could stand there growling, baring their teeth and stamping around for a long time, until one of the workers came along and threw a mitten at them, when they would cough with anger, rise up on their hind legs and fight so that the fur flew. They were afraid of other dogs, hated beggars and at nights, instead of guarding the house, slept in the coach house.

"What are you going to do?" asked Victor.

Nikita looked at a ragged discontented crow that flew from the barn to the cowshed. He did not want to play, and for a reason that he did not understand, he was sad. He would have suggested going into the drawing room, where there was a sofa, and reading something but Victor said:

"Huh, I see you can only play with girls."

"Why?" asked Nikita, flushing.

"Because—you know yourself why."

"You leave me alone. I don't know what you're talking about. Let's go to the well."

The boys went to the well towards which the cows were coming through the open gates to drink. In the distance Mishka Koryashonok was cracking a huge herdsman's whip with a sound like a gun.

"Bayan, Bayan," he shouted suddenly. "Look out, Nikita!" Nikita looked behind him. Bayan, a rosy-grey, shorthorn bull with curly locks on its forehead was moving towards the boys.

"Moo-oo-oo" roared Bayan intermittently, slapping his sides with his tail.

"Run, Victor," shouted Nikita and seizing him by the sleeve ran towards the house.

The bull went after the boys at a trot. "Moo-oo-oo."

Victor looked behind him, shrieked, fell in the snow and covered his head with his arms. Bayan was no more than five paces from him. Nikita stopped, suddenly grew hot with anger, tore off his cap, ran to the bull and began beating it in the face.

"Get away, get away!"

The bull stood still and lowered its horns. Mishka Koryashonok ran up from the other side cracking his whip. Bayan mooed plaintively, turned round and went back to the well. Nikita's lips were trembling from the excitement. He put on his cap and turned round. Victor was already near the house and from there beckoned to him with his hand. Nikita happened to look up at the window—the third to the left from the porch. In the window he saw two astonished blue eyes and over them a big butterfly bow that stood up straight. Lilya, who had climbed on to the window sill, was looking at Nikita and suddenly smiled. Nikita immediately turned away. He did not look at the window again. He was happy now and he shouted:

"Victor, let's go sliding down the hills, hurry up!"

Right up to lunch time they slid down the hills, laughing and "going mad." All the time Nikita kept secretly wondering:

"When I go home and pass the window shall I look up at it or shall I look the other way? No, I won't look at it."

THE CHRISTMAS-TREE BOX

At lunch Nikita tried not to look at Lilya and even if he had tried to look at her he would not have succeeded because between him and the girl sat Anna Apollosovna in a red velvet

jacket; waving her arms she spoke in such a loud and deep bass voice that the glass ornaments under the lamp all tinkled.

"No, no, Alexandra Leontievna," she boomed, "teach your son at home. In the Gymnasium there is such disgusting mismanagement, I could take that director with my own hands and throw him out. . . . Victor," she exclaimed suddenly, "you're not to listen to what your mother says about grownups, you must respect your superiors. And take our teachers, Alexandra Leontievna, the crassest idiots. Each of them sillier than the other. And their geography teacher? What's his name, Victor?"

"Sinichkin."

"I've told you it's not Sinichkin but Sinyavkin. That teacher is such a fool that one day in our hall, after he'd been to visit us, instead of putting on his cap he picked up a cat that had been sleeping on the trunk and put it on his head. . . . Victor, how are you holding that knife and fork? Don't champ. . . . And move your chair closer to the table. . . . What was it I wanted to tell you, Alexandra Leontievna? Oh, yes. I've brought a whole bag full of odds and ends for the Christmas tree. . . . Tomorrow we'll have to get the children busy pasting them up."

"I think they ought to start today," said Mamma, "otherwise they won't be ready in time."

"Do as you think best. I'm going to write some letters. Thank you, my friend, for the lunch."

Anna Apollosovna wiped her lips with a napkin, moved her chair back with a great deal of noise and went into her bedroom with the intention of writing letters, but a minute later the bedsprings creaked as violently as if an elephant had flopped on them.

After the cloth had been cleared off the big table Mamma brought four pairs of scissors and began to make paste. She did it this way: from the cupboard in the corner, where the family medicines were kept, Mamma got a jar of starch, shook about a spoonful into a glass, put in a couple of teaspoons of

cold water and mixed it all into a paste. Then she poured in boiling water from the samovar and stirred it until it was clear like a jelly. This made an excellent paste.

The boys brought in Anna Apollosovna's leather bag and put it on the table. Mamma opened it and began to take out the contents: sheets of gold paper, smooth and crinkled, sheets of silver, blue, green and orange paper, Bristol board, boxes of candles and Christmas-tree candlesticks, boxes of goldfish and coloured cockerels, boxes of hollow glass balls threaded on strings, others with glass balls that had silver hooks on top and depressions painted in different colours on four sides, still more boxes full of crackers, bunches of gold and silver tinsel, lanterns with coloured mica windows and a big star. With each new discovery the children groaned with delight.

"There are some more good things," said Mamma, dipping her hands into the bag, "but for the time being we shall not unwrap them all. Let's get on with the glueing."

Victor began to make chains, Nikita made paper bags for sweets while Mamma cut paper and cardboard.

"Auntie Sasha, may I make a little box?" asked Lilya very politely.

"Make whatever you like, my dear."

The children began to work in silence, breathing heavily through their noses and wiping their starchy hands on their clothes. While they were working Mamma told them that in the old days there were no decorations for Christmas trees to be had and everything had to be made by hand. Some people were so clever at it, she had seen it herself, that they could make a whole castle with towers and winding staircases and draw-bridges. In front of the castle there was a lake made of a mirror surrounded by moss. On the pond there was a golden bark drawn by two swans.

Lilya listened, working in silence, occasionally helping herself with the tip of her tongue. Nikita left his sweets wrappers

and looked at her. Mamma went out of the room at that moment. Victor hung about ten yards of different coloured paper chains on the chairs.

"What are you making?" asked Nikita.

Without lifting her head Lilya smiled and cut a star out of gold paper and pasted it on the blue lid of the box.

"What do you want that box for?" asked Nikita softly.

"The box is for dolls' gloves," answered Lilya seriously. "You're a boy and you don't understand such things." She raised her head and looked at Nikita with severe blue eyes.

He began to blush, got redder and hotter until he was crimson all over.

"How red you are," said Lilya, "like a beetroot."

Again she bent over her box. Her face had a roguish smile on it. Nikita sat as though he were glued to the chair. He did not know what to say next and he could not have left the room however hard he tried. The girl laughed at him, but he did not take offence, was not angry but only stared at her. Suddenly Lilya spoke to him again, this time in a different voice and without raising her eyes, as though there were already some secret between them.

"D'you like the box?" she said.

"Yes. I like it," answered Nikita.

"I like it, too, I like it very much," she said rocking her head back and forth which made her bow and her curls sway. She wanted to add something but Victor came along and thrust his head between Nikita and Lilya.

"What box, where's the box?" he asked. "Huh, rubbishy little box, I can make as many as you want of them...."

"Victor, honestly I'll tell Mamma that you don't let me get on with my work," she said in a trembling voice. She took her glue and paper and went to the other end of the table.

Victor winked at Nikita.

"I told you you'd have to be careful with her—tittle-tattle."

Late that evening, as they lay in bed in a darkened room,

Nikita, the bedclothes over his head, spoke in a dull voice from under the blankets.

"Victor, are you asleep?..."

"Not yet.... I don't know.... What?"

"Listen, Victor.... I've got to tell you a terrible secret. Victor.... Don't sleep.... Victor, listen...."

"H-m-m-m, Phew-ew-ew-ew-ew," answered Victor.

THE PRESENT ON A SEPARATE SLEIGH

It was only just daybreak when Nikita heard somebody raking in the stoves; then a door banged at the end of the passage—that was the furnaceman bringing in bundles of firewood and dung briquettes.

Nikita awoke in a joyful mood. The morning was bright and frosty.

The window was covered in a thick layer of floral designs in frost. Victor was still asleep, Nikita threw a pillow at him, but he merely grunted and pulled the blankets over his head. Out of sheer joy Nikita slipped quickly out of bed, dressed and then began wondering where to go; he ran first to Arkady Ivanovich.

Arkady Ivanovich had only just awakened and was reading the same letter that he had already read some thirty times. When he saw Nikita he raised his feet with the blankets over them and brought them down with a crash on the bed.

"How extraordinary!" he shouted. "You're the first one up!"

"Arkady Ivanovich, it's a wonderful day today."

"Yes, my boy, it's a wonderful day."

"Arkady Ivanovich, there's something I want to ask you." Nikita ran his finger along the lintel of the door. "Do you like the Babkins very much?"

"Which of the Babkins do you mean?"

"The children."

"So? And which of the children do you want me to like?"

Although Arkady Ivanovich spoke in a very ordinary voice he said it very quickly. He leaned his elbows on the pillow and looked at Nikita without a smile, it is true, but very attentively. Apparently he also knew something. Nikita suddenly turned round and ran out of the room, thought a bit and then went out into the yard.

Over the workers' quarters, over the bathhouse in the gully and farther on, beyond the white fields, over the whole village rose columns of blue smoke. During the night the hoarfrost on the trees had become still thicker and the branches of the huge black poplars over the pond were hanging down quite low from the weight of the snow; they made a clear silhouette against the blue frosty sky. The snow scintillated and crackled. The frost made his nose sting and clung to his eyelashes.

On a heap of still faintly smoking ashes near the back porch Sharok and Katok were growling at each other. Mishka Koryashonok, with a thick stick in his hand, came floundering through the snow straight towards Nikita; he was going to play a sort of hockey game with frozen snowballs. Just at that moment a string of horse-drawn sleighs appeared to the right of the village. One by one they crawled out of the gully and swayed along, low and black against the snow, past the lower pond to the dam.

Mishka Koryashonok, placing the thumb of his mitten against a nostril, blew his nose.

"They're our sleighs returning from the city with the presents," he said.

The sleighs were now crossing the dam under the arch formed by the snow-covered willows and the boys could hear the crunching of the snow, the whistle of the sleigh runners and the heavy breathing of the horses.

The first to enter the yard, leading the procession of sleighs as usual, was the old worker Nikifor on a big roan

mare Vesta. Nikifor, a sturdily built old man, walked easily beside the string of sleighs in frozen felt boots bound round with rope. His long, heavy sheepskin coat was thrown open, the upturned fur collar, his cap and his beard were all white with frost. His mare Vesta, her sides pumping and sweating all over, stood in a cloud of steam. As he walked along Nikifor shouted to the last sleigh in a strong voice that was hoarse from a cold.

"Hi, turn towards the barns—and the last sleigh is to go to the house."

The train consisted of sixteen sleighs. The horses pulled up smartly, there was a strong smell of horse sweat, whips cracked, sleigh runners wheezed and a cloud of steam stood over the procession.

When the last sleigh had left the dam and drew nearer Nikita could not at first make out what was on it. It was big, strange in form, green and with a red stripe. Nikita's heart began to beat faster. On the sleigh, behind which a second pair of runners had been attached, a sharp-bowed, two-oared boat creaked and swayed. Lying alongside the boat were two green oars and a mast with a copper ball on top.

So this was the present that he had been promised in the mysterious letter.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

A big frozen fir tree was dragged into the drawing room. Pakhom spent a long time chipping and hammering with his axe to fix it into the wooden cross that it was to stand on. At last they lifted up the tree and it was so high that the delicate green top was bent over under the ceiling.

There was a waft of cold from the tree, gradually the frozen branches thawed and spread out to their normal positions; the odour of fir needles filled the house. The children brought a

heap of paper chains and boxes of decorations into the drawing room, placed chairs around the tree and began trimming it. They found they had not made enough. They had to paste together more wrappers for the sweets, paint walnuts with gold paint and tie silver threads to the little spice cakes and big Crimean apples. The children spent the whole evening at this work until Lilya, resting her head with its crumpled bow on her arms, dropped off to sleep.

Christmas Eve came. The decoration of the tree was completed, they covered it with gold tinsel, hung up chains and fixed the candles in their little coloured holders. When everything was ready Mamma said:

"And now go away until evening, children; don't you dare even glance into the drawing room."

That day they lunched late and in a great hurry—the children had nothing but an apple charlotte. The house was in an uproar. The boys wandered about the house, worrying everybody, asking how much longer they had to wait till evening. Even Arkady Ivanovich—he had changed into a tail coat and a starched shirt that stood out like a box—did not know what to do with himself and wandered from window to window whistling. Lilya went to her mother.

The sun crawled towards the earth's rim with terrible slowness, it turned a rosy hue, hazy clouds spread over it, the purple shadows thrown by the well on the white snow grew longer. At last Mamma told the boys to go and get dressed. On his bed Nikita found a blue silk Russian blouse with herring-bone embroidery on the collar, cuffs and skirt, a corded silk girdle with tassels and baggy, velvet Turkish trousers. He dressed and ran to his mother, who parted his hair with a comb, took him by the shoulders, looked him straight in the face and then took him over to a big pier glass framed in mahogany.

In the mirror Nikita saw a nicely-dressed, well-mannered boy. Surely that could not be he?

"Oh, Nikita, Nikita," sighed his mother as she kissed his head, "if you were always such a nice boy!"

Nikita tiptoed out of the room and saw a girl in white walking importantly down the passage towards him. She was wearing a gorgeous white dress with muslin petticoats, a big white bow in her hair and six fat curls on either side of her face—also unrecognizable—falling on to her thin shoulders. Lilya walked up to Nikita and looked at him with a grimace.

"Did you think I was a ghost?" she asked. "What are you scared of?" and she walked into the study and sat down on the sofa with her legs drawn up under her.

Nikita followed her into the room and also sat down on the sofa but at the other end. The stove had been lit, the logs crackled and shed live coals. A flickering, reddish light lit up the backs of the leather chairs, the corner of the gilded frame on the wall and the bust of Pushkin that stood between the two bookcases.

Lilya sat motionless. It was wonderful, the way the light from the stove lit up her cheek and her retrousse nose. Victor appeared wearing a blue uniform with shining buttons and a collar of gold braid so tight that it was difficult for him to talk.

Victor sat down in an armchair, also without speaking. In the drawing room nearby they could hear Mamma and Anna Apollosova—they were undoing packages, they stood something on the floor and were talking in low voices. Victor would have liked to look through the keyhole but it was pasted over with paper on the other side.

Then the outside door was slammed, they heard a number of voices and the steps of many tiny feet. The children from the village had arrived. He should have run to greet them but Nikita could not move. A warm bluish light glowed through the frost-patterns on the windows. Then Lilya spoke in a thin, small voice:

"A star has come out."

Just then the study doors were thrown open. The children jumped off the sofa. In the drawing room, from floor to ceiling, the Christmas tree gleamed with many, many candles. It was like a fire-tree flashing gold, sparks and long rays of light. It was a heavy light that smelled of warmth, fir needles, wax, tangerines and spice cakes.

The children stood motionless, astounded. The outer doors to the drawing room were also opened and the village children came in and pressed close against each other and to the wall. They had all removed their felt boots and wore thick woolen stockings—they were dressed in red, pink and yellow shirts, yellow, crimson and white kerchiefs.

Mamma began to play a polka on the piano. As she played she turned towards the tree with a smile on her face and sang:

*"The heron he has legs so long,
But couldn't find the way back home..."*

Nikita held out his hand to Lilya. She gave him her hand but continued to look at the tree which was reflected in detail in her blue eyes, one tree in each eye. The children stood quite still.

Arkady Ivanovich ran over to the crowd of boys and girls, took them by the hands and began to gallop round the tree with them. The tails of his coat flew out. As he ran round he grabbed two more children, then Nikita and Lilya and Victor and at last all the children had joined hands and were dancing round the Christmas tree.

*"Now I'm hiding gold, hiding gold.
Now I'm hiding silver, silver,"*

sang the village children.

Nikita pulled a cracker from the Christmas tree and broke it; inside there was a tall pointed cap with a star on it. Soon crackers were popping everywhere, there was a smell of gunpowder and a rustling of tissue-paper caps.

Lilya got a paper pinafore with pockets. She put it on. Her cheeks were red like apples, her lips were smeared with chocolate. She was laughing all the time as she looked at a huge doll seated beneath the Christmas tree on a big basket with a complete doll's layette.

Under the tree there were also paper packets for the village boys and girls wrapped in vari-coloured kerchiefs. Victor got a whole regiment of soldiers with cannon and tents and Nikita a real leather saddle and bridle with a riding whip.

Now came the sound of cracking nuts, shells crunched underfoot and the children breathed heavily through their noses as they unwrapped their presents

Mamma again played the piano, the children danced and sang round the Christmas tree, but the candles were already burning low and Arkady Ivanovich, jumping up and down, put them out. The tree grew duller. Mamma closed the piano and told them all to go into the dining room for tea.

Arkady Ivanovich, however, did not stop—he formed the children in a long chain, he at the head and twenty-five boys and girls behind him, and ran out through the passage and by the longest route into the dining room.

In the hall Lilya broke away from the chain and stood still to catch her breath, looking at Nikita with laughing eyes. They were close to the hallstand where the heavy coats were hanging.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Lilya.

"You're laughing yourself," answered Nikita.

"And what are you looking at me for?"

Nikita blushed, drew nearer to her and, not knowing himself how it happened, bent down towards Lilya and kissed her. She immediately responded with a rapid speech:

"You're a nice boy, I haven't told you because I didn't want anybody to know, it's a secret." She turned round and ran into the dining room.

After tea Arkady Ivanovich arranged a game of forfeits

but the children were tired, had eaten too much and had no clear idea of what they were supposed to do. At last one tiny boy in a spotted shirt dozed right off, fell from his chair and began to cry loudly.

Mamma said that the Christmas-tree party was over. The children went out into the passage where their felt boots and sheepskin coats lay along the wall. They dressed and poured out into the frosty night in a bunch.

Nikita went with the children as far as the dam. As he made his way back home, the moon shone in a pale, multi-coloured ring high up in the heavens. The trees on the dam and in the garden were huge and white and they seemed to have grown taller in the moonlight. To his right a white frosty desert stretched far away into impenetrable darkness. A shadow with a big head and long legs moved by Nikita's side.

Nikita felt as if he were walking in his sleep through some enchanted kingdom. Only in a kingdom of magic could it be so strange and at the same time so joyous.

VICTOR'S MISFORTUNE

During the holidays Victor made friends with Mishka Koryashonok and went to the lower pond with him to set fire to the "cats." One they fired was so big that the flames leaped out of the ice to more than the height of a man. Then they built a fortress in the ditch beyond the pond—a turret of snow with a wall round it complete with battlements and gates. After that Victor wrote a letter to the Konchan gang.

"You cockeyed Konchan blacksmiths that shod a mouse, we'll give you something to remember us by. We'll be waiting for you in our fort.

*Victor Babkin, Gymnast, 2nd Class,
Commandant of the Fort."*

They nailed the letter to a stick and Mishka Koryashonok took it to the village and stuck it into a snowdrift beside the Artamonov cottage. Syomka, Lyonka and Artamoshka Junior, Alyoshka and Vanka Chernoukhov and Savoska's nephew Petrushka climbed on to the snowdrift beside the stick and for a long time hurled threats at the Konchan crowd, threw snow balls at them and then went away with Mishka Koryashonok and occupied the fort with him.

Victor ordered them to make snowballs of various sizes. They piled them up inside the fort wall, raised a flagstaff with a bunch of reeds on top on the turret and sat down to wait for the enemy.

Nikita came, looked at the fortifications and pushed his hands into his pockets.

"Nobody will come, your fort's no good; I'm not going to play with you, I'm going home"

"Found a girl to play with," shouted Victor over the wall. "Lady-killer!"

The Artamonov boys laughed loudly. Vanka Chernoukhov whistled through his fingers.

"If I wanted to I'd chase the lot of you out of your fort," said Nikita, "only you're not worth dirtying my hands on," and he stuck his tongue out at Victor and went home across the pond.

Snowballs flew after him but he did not even turn round.

Those sitting in the fortress did not have long to wait. From the direction of the village, across the snow-covered backwaters, came the Konchan boys. They came straight towards the fortress, up to their knees in snow. There were about fifteen of them.

Victor began telling them that he would chop them all up for firewood and sniffed with his frost-reddened nose. He rolled his eyes. The Konchan boys stopped at the gates of the fort, some of them sat down on the snow. They had with them the little boy who wore his mother's shawl. The Konchan crowd

was led by Styopka Karnaushkin. He took a good look at the fort and walked right up to the wall.

"Give us that boy with the shiny buttons," he said. "We'll rub his ears in the snow..."

Victor sniffed with a troubled air. Mishka whispered: 'Throw a lump of snow at him. heave it over!' Victor lifted up a lump of snow, threw it and missed. Karnaushkin stepped back to his own crowd. The Konchan boys jumped to their feet and began making snowballs. Lumps of snow came flying at them from the fort. The Artamonov boys were particularly good shots. They immediately knocked over the little boy in his mother's shawl. The Konchan boys began to reply. Clouds of snowballs flew from both sides. The pole with the device tied to it fell from the top of the turret.

Vanka Chernoukhov fell from the wall and surrendered to the Konchaners. Suddenly Victor's cap was knocked off and another snowball struck him in the face. The Konchan boys roared, howled and whistled, and charged into the fort...

The wall was breached and the defenders fled through the reeds across the pond.

WHAT WAS IN THE VASE ON THE CLOCK

Nikita himself did not know why he found it dull playing with the boys. He went home, took off his hat and coat and as he walked through the rooms heard Lilya talking to her mother.

"Mamma, will you please give me a piece of clean rag. Valentina, my new doll, has hurt her leg and I'm worried about her health."

Nikita stood still and again felt the joy that he had known all those days. So great was his joy that it seemed as though a jolly music-box somewhere inside him was turning and playing a gentle tune.

Nikita went into the study, sat down on the sofa in the place where Lilya had sat two days before, screwed up his eyes and studied the frost-patterns on the windows. They were dainty and whimsical designs, designs from fairyland, from the place where the magic music box was playing soundlessly. There were branches, leaves, trees and strange figures of animals and people. As he looked at the designs Nikita felt that words were putting themselves together and singing and that these astounding words and that singing gave him a tingling feeling on the crown of his head.

Nikita slid carefully off the sofa, looked for a small sheet of paper on his father's writing desk and began to write verses in big letters:

*"Oh, my forest, you're my forest,
You're my fairyland, my forest,
You are full of beasts and birds,
Wild men whispering merry words,
I love you, my forest,
How I love my forest..."*

It was too hard to write any more about the forest. Nikita chewed the end of the pen and looked up at the ceiling. Even the words that he had written were not those that had sung themselves spontaneously a short time before and had asked for their liberty. Nikita read through the poem and liked it all the same. He folded the paper in eight and put it in his pocket; he went into the dining room where Lilya was sitting sewing by the window. The hand that held the paper in his pocket was damp with perspiration and somehow he could not make up his mind to show her the verses.

Victor came home at dusk, blue with the cold and with a swollen nose. Anna Apollosovna clapped her hands.

"They've broken his nose again! Whom have you been fighting with? Answer me this minute."

"I haven't been fighting with anybody, my nose swelled of

itself," answered Victor gloomily; he went into his own room and lay down on the bed.

Nikita went in to him and stood beside the stove. A few stars had appeared in the greenish sky as though they had been pricked out with a needle.

"Do you want me to read you a poem about the forest?" asked Nikita.

Victor shrugged his shoulders and put his feet on the bed-rail.

"You can tell that Styopka Karnaushkin that it will be better for him if he never comes near me again."

"D'you know," said Nikita, "these verses describe a certain forest. It's the sort of forest that you can't see but that everybody knows about. If you are miserable you read about that forest and you get better. Or, sometimes, you know, you see something in a dream that's awfully good, you don't know what it is but it's good—you wake up and you can't remember what it is . . . understand?"

"No, I don't understand," said Victor, "and I don't want to listen to your poems."

Nikita sighed, stood a little while beside the stove and then went out. In the big hall that was lit up by the fire in the stove, Lilya was sitting on a trunk covered with a wolfskin—she was watching the flames dancing in the fire.

Nikita sat down beside her on the trunk. The hall smelt of the heat of the stove, of the heavy coats hanging there and there was the sweetly sad smell of old things in the huge chest of drawers.

"Let us talk a little," began Lilya thoughtfully, "tell me something interesting."

"Would you like me to tell you about a dream I saw not long ago?"

"Yes, tell me about the dream, please."

Nikita began to tell her the dream about the cat, the portraits that came to life, how he flew and what he saw when he

was flying close to the ceiling. Lilya listened attentively, holding on her lap the doll whose leg had been bandaged.

When he had finished his story she turned to him and her eyes were open wide with fear and curiosity.

"What was in the vase?" she asked in a whisper.

"I don't know."

"There must have been something interesting there."

"But I saw it in a dream."

"It doesn't matter, you should have looked all the same. You're a boy, you don't understand anything. Tell me, have you really got a vase like that?"

"We've got a clock like that, but I don't remember the vase. The clock is in granddad's study, it doesn't go."

"Let's go and have a look."

"It's dark there."

"We'll take a lantern from the Christmas tree. You bring the lantern, do, please."

Nikita ran into the drawing room, took a lantern with coloured mica windows from the Christmas tree, lit it and went back to the hall.

Lilya threw a big woolen shawl round her shoulders. The children crept out into the corridor and slipped along to the summer rooms. In the dark high drawing room there was a thick layer of frost on the windows and the moonlight threw the heavy black shadows of branches on to them. It was chilly and there was a smell of rotting apples. The oaken doors leading to the adjoining room were standing ajar.

"Is the clock in there?" asked Lilya.

"No, farther on, in the third room."

"Nikita, aren't you afraid of anything?"

Nikita pulled the door, it squeaked piteously and the sound echoed dully through the empty rooms. Lilya grasped Nikita by the arm. The lantern shivered and its red and yellow rays flickered on the walls.

The children entered the next room on tiptoe. Here the

moonlight coming through the windows lay in bluish squares on the parquet floor. There were striped armchairs against the walls and there in the corner was the bandy-legged sofa. Nikita's head was in a whirl—the room was exactly as he had once seen it.

"They're looking at us," whispered Lilya pointing to the two portraits on the wall—the old man and the old woman.

The children ran through the room and opened the other doors. The study was flooded with moonlight. The glass panes and their gilded frames in the doors of the bookcases were gleaming brightly. Over the fireplace, right in the light, the lady in the riding habit smiled mysteriously.

"Who's that?" asked Lilya, coming close to Nikita.

"It's she," he answered in a whisper.

Lilya nodded, looked round the room and suddenly shouted:

"The vase, look, Nikita, the vase!"

At the far end of the room stood a tall clock in a mahogany case, the disc of its pendulum hanging motionless: on top of the clock, between two wooden finials, stood a bronze vase decorated with the head of a lion. Somehow Nikita had never noticed it before but now he knew—that was the vase of his dream.

He placed a chair against the clock, climbed on it and by standing on tiptoe reached into the vase: on the bottom he could feel dust and something hard.

"I've found it," he said, grasping it tight in his fist and jumping down to the floor. Just then something snorted at him from behind the bookcase, two violet velvety eyes flashed and out crawled the cat, Vasily Vasilievich, who was catching mice in the study.

Lilya waved her arms and ran, Nikita ran after her—he felt as though somebody's hand was touching his head, so awful it was. Vasily Vasilievich, the cat, overtook the children and ran silently through the moonlit rooms, his tail lowered.

The children ran into the hall and sat down again on the trunk scarcely able to get their breath from fear. Lilya's cheeks were burning.

"What is it?" she asked, looking Nikita straight in the eyes.

He opened his fingers. On the palm of his hand lay a thin ring with a blue stone in it. Lilya, speechless, clapped her hands.

"A ring!"

"It's a magic ring," said Nikita.

"Listen, what are we going to do with it?"

Nikita frowned, took her hand and began pushing the ring on to her index finger.

"No, why me?" asked Lilya; she looked at the stone, smiled, sighed and, throwing her arms round Nikita's neck, kissed him.

Nikita turned so red that he had to go away from the stove. He mustered all the courage he had and said:

"This is for you as well," and out of his pocket he pulled a piece of crumpled paper folded in eight, the paper on which he had written his poem, and gave it to Lilya.

She unfolded it, read it with her lips just moving, and then said pensively:

"Thank you, Nikita, I like your poem very much."

THE LAST EVENING

At tea that evening Mamma exchanged glances several times with Anna Apollosovna and shrugged her shoulders. Arkady Ivanovich sat gazing intently at his glass with a face that expressed nothing but gave you the idea that even if you killed him he wouldn't say a word. Anna Apollosovna finished her fifth cup of tea with cream and hot buns, cleared a space on the table in front of her of cups, plates and crumbs and placed her big hands there, palm down.

"No, and no, and no, my dear Alexandra Leontievna," she said in her deep voice. "I never go back on what I have said: good things have to be taken in small quantities. So there you are, children," she turned round and dug Victor in the back with her forefinger so that he should not sit round-shouldered—"Tomorrow is Monday, and that, of course, you've forgotten. Drink up your tea and go to bed immediately. We leave tomorrow morning at daybreak."

Victor silently pushed out his lips so that they protruded beyond the tip of his nose. Lilya quickly lowered her eyes and bent over her teacup. Nikita's eyes immediately became bleary and rays shot out from the flames of the lamp. He turned away and looked at Vasily Vasilievich.

The cat sat on the cleanly washed floor busily licking a hind leg that he held out like a pistol, his eyes screwed up. The cat was neither bored nor merry, there was nothing for him to hurry over; "tomorrow," he thought, "you people have a working day, you will again begin solving problems in arithmetic and writing dictation but I, the cat, have not celebrated any holidays, have not written any poems, have not kissed any girls, and my tomorrow will be all right."

Victor and Lilya finished their tea. Looking at their mother's thick brows that were already beginning to twitch they said good night and together with Nikita left the room.

"Victor!" Anna Apollosovna shouted after them.

"What, Mamma?"

"How are you walking?"

"What's the matter?"

"You're walking as though you were being pulled on a string. Walk smartly. Don't walk round the room in circles—that's the door, over there. Pull yourself up straight. . . . What you'll be fit for in life, I don't know!"

The children went out. In the warm and half-dark hall, where the boys had to turn to the right, Nikita stopped in front of Lilya and, biting his lips, said:

"Will you come and see us in the summer?"

"That depends on Mamma," answered Lilya in a thin voice, without raising her eyes.

"Will you write to me?"

"Yes, I'll write you letters, Nikita."

"Well, then, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Nikita."

Lilya tossed her hair-bow, held out her hand giving him the tips of her fingers and then went to her own room without turning back: she walked upright and precisely. You could not guess what she was thinking about as you watched her walk away. "A very, very reticent nature," Anna Apollosovna used to say.

While Victor was muttering to himself and packing his books and toys in a basket, unsticking and putting some pictures away in a little box, while he crawled under the table looking for his penknife, Nikita did not say a word: he undressed quickly, got into bed, covered his head with the blankets and pretended to be asleep.

He felt that the end of the world had come. As sleep overtook him he saw, like a shadow on the wall, a huge hair-bow that he would never forget for the whole of his life. In his sleep he heard voices, somebody came over to his bed, then the voices drew farther away again. He saw warm branches like arms, huge trees, a reddish path through thick undergrowth that opened up easily before him. It was uncommonly pleasant in that strange forest, reddish from the light and he wanted to cry on account of something sadder than he had ever known before. Suddenly a red Indian wearing golden spectacles stuck his head out between the leaves: "Oh, you're still sleeping," shouted the head in a voice of thunder.

Nikita opened his eyes. The warm morning light fell on his face. In front of the bed stood Arkady Ivanovich tapping his nose with the end of a pencil.

"Get up, get up, you villain!"

SEPARATION

At the end of January Vasily Nikitievich, Nikita's father, sent a letter home.

"...I am in despair, the business with the legacy seems to be going to keep me for a long time yet, my dear Sasha—apparently I shall have to go to Moscow for the business. In any case I shall be with you by Lent..."

The letter made Mamma very sad and in the evening she showed it to Arkady Ivanovich.

"I've had enough of that legacy business," she said. "I don't want it if it causes so much trouble; we've been separated the whole winter. Sometimes I think that Nikita has even begun to forget his father."

She turned away and stared at the black, frosted window. It was black outside and the frost was so heavy that the trees in the garden crackled, the roof beams in the attic creaked so loudly that the whole house shook and in the mornings they would find dead sparrows lying on the snow. Mamma dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Yes, separation, separation," muttered Arkady Ivanovich and was apparently thinking about his own separation—his hand fumbled for a letter in his pocket.

At the moment Nikita was drawing a map of South America—his mother had had a long talk with him that day, she grew angry and told him that during the holidays he had become lazy and had let himself go, that apparently he wanted to become a provincial clerk or a telegraph operator at Bezenchuk Station. "Instead of silly pictures," she said, "you'll draw me a map of South America this evening."

Nikita drew the map of America but all the time he was wondering whether he had really forgotten his father. No. In place of the Amazon, at the point where the lines of latitude and longitude cross, he saw his father's face,—rosy cheeks, flashing eyes and flashing teeth, a jolly face with a dark beard

parted in two and a loud laughing voice. You could sit for hours staring at his mouth and die from laughter over his stories. Mamma frequently accused him of irresponsibility and frivolity but actually he had a rather too lively character. Suddenly, for example, his father would get the idea that the frogs that filled the three ponds on the estate were all going to waste and would sit for evenings talking about how to feed them, breed them, salt them down in barrels and send them to Paris. "You can laugh," he would say to Mamma, whose laughter over the whole business brought tears to her eyes, "but you'll see how much money I earn with the frogs." Father ordered part of a pond to be fenced off and frog-pens made, he boiled a mash to feed them on, and brought experimental frogs into the house until Mamma said that he could either have the frogs or her, that she was scared to death of them and that the idea of living in a house full of frogs disgusted her.

One day Father went to town and from there sent back carts loaded with old oak doors and window frames: his letter said: "Dear Sasha, quite by accident I managed to buy up a lot of window frames and doors cheaply. These are just what we need for the pavilion you dreamed of building on the hill under the poplars. I have spoken to an architect who recommends building a pavilion that we can live in during the winter if we want to. I am quite taken up with the idea because our house stands in such a hollow that there's no sort of view from the windows." Mamma only cried: for three months Arkady Ivanovich's salary had not been paid and now he had undertaken fresh expenses. . . . She flatly refused to have the pavilion built and the window frames and doors stood rotting in a shed. Then Father got another fever—agricultural improvements—and again a dead loss: he ordered machinery from America, brought it from the station himself, grew angry teaching the workers to handle it and shouted at everybody—"Careful, careful, you accursed devils!"

Some time later Mamma asked:

"Well, and what about your wonderful binder?"

"What about it?" Father drummed with his fingers on the windowpane. "It's a fine machine."

"I saw it. It's standing in the shed."

Father shrugged his shoulders, and rapidly stroked his beard in two parts.

"Is it broken?" asked Mamma.

"Those fools of Americans," snorted Father, "think up machines that break every minute. It's not my fault."

As he drew the Amazon and its tributaries Nikita thought of his father with love and a tender pleasure. His conscience was clear, his mother had made a mistake in saying he had forgotten his father.

Suddenly something in the wall cracked like a pistol shot. Mamma gasped loudly and dropped her knitting on the floor. Under the chest of drawers Akhilka, the hedgehog, grunted and snorted in anger. Nikita looked at Arkady Ivanovich, who pretended to be reading, but his eyes were closed although he was not asleep. Nikita was sorry for Arkady Ivanovich: the poor fellow was always thinking about his fiancée, Vassa Nilovna, a schoolteacher in the town. That's what separation means!

Nikita rested his cheek in his hand and began to think about his own separation. Lilya had sat at this same table and now she was no longer there. How sad—there she was and now she was gone. There was the stain on the table where she had spilled the gum. And on that wall the shadow of her hair-bow had often fallen. "Happy days have flown away." Nikita's throat ached from these extraordinarily sad words that he had just thought of. In order not to forget them he wrote them down under the map of America. "Happy days have flown away." He continued drawing and took the Amazon where it did not belong—all through Paraguay and Uruguay to Tierra del Fuego.

"Alexandra Leontievna, I'm afraid you're right: that boy's training to be a telegraphist at Bezenchuk Station," said Arkady Ivanovich in that cold, calm voice that gave you the creeps; for a long time he had been looking at what Nikita was doing to the map.

WORKADAY WORLD

The frosts became fiercer. Icy winds shook the hoarfrost from the trees. The snow was covered with a hard crust over which the frozen and hungry wolves, single and in pairs, came right up to the estate at night.

When they smelt the wolves Sharok and Katok would begin to whine, crawl under the carriage house and from there howl in tones that cut right through you—oo-oo-oo-ooo.

The wolves crossed the frozen pond and stood in the reeds sniffing the smells of human habitation. They grew bolder and came into the garden, sat down on the glade in front of the house, stared at the dark, frozen windows with their flashing eyes, raised their heads into the frozen darkness and began on a low note as though growling, then louder and louder, raising their hunger call higher and higher, they began to howl, continuously, higher and higher, penetratingly. . . .

These wolf howls made Sharok and Katok bury their heads in the straw and lay senseless with fear under the carriage house. In the workers' quarters the carpenter Pakhom, tossing on the stove under his long, sheepskin greatcoat, muttered half asleep:

"Oh, Lord, how heavy are our sins!"

These were working days in the house. Everybody got up early, when the crimson light of dawn had just reached the bluish-black windows, the frost-bound windows became a little brighter and there was light in the upper part of the room.

Stove doors clanged in the house. In the kitchen the tin oil lamp was still burning. There was the smell of a samovar

and of warm bread. They did not sit long over breakfast. Mamma cleared the table in the dining room and got out the sewing machine. A seamstress came to them from the village of Pestravka—bent, pock-marked Sonya, with a front tooth worn down from constant biting of thread; together with Mamma she stitched all sorts of everyday things. They spoke in low voices over their sewing, they ripped calico with a crackling sound. Sonya the seamstress had a dull, uninteresting look about her, and seemed to have been lying behind a cupboard for years, to have just been found, cleaned up a little and set to sew.

These days Arkady Ivanovich was more pressing with the studies and made, as he loved to say, a leap forward: they made a start on algebra, a subject that is as dry as dust.

While learning arithmetic it is possible to think of all sorts of useless but interesting things: about rusty tanks with dead mice in them into which water poured through three pipes, or about the eternal "someone" in an oilcloth coat with a long nose who mixed three sorts of coffee or bought so many ingots of copper or that same unlucky merchant with his two pieces of cloth. But in algebra there was nothing to take hold of, there was no living thing in it, the only interesting thing was that the binding of the book smelled of glue and when Arkady Ivanovich bent over Nikita's chair to explain the rules his face, round like a water jug, was reflected in the inkwell.

When Arkady Ivanovich talked about history he stood with his back to the stove. The reflection of his black frock coat, ginger beard and gold spectacles in the white tiles was simply marvelous. He was telling Nikita how Pepin the Short at Soissons hacked through a mug and Arkady Ivanovich brought his arm down with a sweep to cut the air with his hand.

"You must get this into your head," he said to Nikita. "People like Pepin the Short were famous for their unwavering will power and courage. Unlike some people, they were not too lazy to work, they did not let their eyes wander to the

inkwell in which nothing is written, they did not even know such shameful words as 'I can't' or 'I'm tired.' They did not twist the hair on their foreheads instead of mastering the rules of algebra. That's why," he raised the book which he held with a finger between the pages, "they serve as examples to us today."

After lunch Mamma usually said to Arkady Ivanovich:

"If it's twenty degrees below again today, Nikita cannot go out."

Arkady Ivanovich walked to the window and breathed on the glass at the place where the thermometer was hanging outside.

"Twenty-one and a half, Alexandra Leontievna."

"I thought so," said Mamma, "go and find something to do, Nikita."

Nikita went into his father's study, climbed on to the leather sofa at the end nearest the stove and opened a magic book by Fenimore Cooper.

It was so quiet in the study that a scarcely audible ringing sound began in his ears. What wonderful stories one could think up when one was alone with that sound on the sofa. White lights streamed through the frosty windows. Nikita read Cooper: then, lying for a long time with his brows knitted, he imagined waves of green grass rustling in the wind over the wide prairies that had no beginning and no end; piebald mustangs turned their merry heads towards him and neighed at full gallop: dark canyons; a grey waterfall and above it the Chief of the Hurons standing motionless in his war bonnet on a high crag shaped like a sugar loaf, a long rifle in his hand. In the depths of a forest, on a stone between the roots of a giant tree, he, Nikita himself, sat with his fists pressed into his cheeks, A fire burned at his feet. It was so silent in the forest that he could hear ringing in his ears. Nikita had come in search of Lilya who had been cunningly kidnaped. He performed many brave deeds, carried Lilya on a wild mustang on many

occasions, scrambled through the canyons and with a skilful shot brought the Chief of the Hurons down from the sugar-loaf crag but each time he shot him down the Chief got up on the rock again; Nikita kidnaped and saved Lilya and just had to keep on saving and kidnaping her times out of number.

When the frost and Mamma allowed him to poke his nose out of doors Nikita wandered about the yard alone. The games he used to play with Mishka Koryashonok bored him and Mishka nowadays spent most of his time in the workers' quarters playing cards—at "nose" or at "khlyust," a game in which the loser was dragged along by his hair.

Nikita went over to the wall and remembered: from here he had seen at the window of the house the only blue hair-bow in the world. The window was empty now. Over by the carriage house Sharok and Katok had dug a dead blackbird out of the snow—it was the same blackbird: stooping down beside it Lilya had said: "What a pity, Nikita, look, a dead bird." Nikita took the blackbird away from the dogs, carried it beyond the cellars and buried it in a snowdrift.

As he crossed the dam Nikita remembered how he had walked that way on the night after the Christmas party under the huge willows that were transparent in the moonlight and how his shadow slipped along by his side. Why was it that he had not at that time sufficiently valued that which had happened to him? That was the time when he should have closed his eyes and have felt keenly how great was his happiness. Now a biting wind was howling through the frozen, black willows: on the pond the ice ramp from which he and Lilya had raced on their toboggan had grown smaller—he remembered that Lilya had not spoken, had screwed up her eyes and held tightly on to the sides of the toboggan. All traces of that lay buried under the snow.

Nikita walked over a good hard snow crust out of the yard where to the north the snowdrifts were level with the thatched roofs. From here he could see the whole flat white field, a snow

desert that merged in frosty gloom with the sky. A whirlwind trailed across the snow like a column of smoke. The skirts of his sheepskin coat were blown back. Powdered snow blew from the crest of a snowdrift. Nikita himself did not know why he wanted to stand and gaze at the desert of snow.

Mamma had begun to notice that Nikita was walking about looking miserable and she spoke of it to Arkady Ivanovich. They decided to stop the algebra lessons, to send Nikita to bed early and, as Arkady Ivanovich not very wittily expressed it, "pump him out" with castor oil, all of which was done.

Arkady Ivanovich noticed that Nikita became happier. The real cure, however, came three weeks later: it was a strong wind from the south that rolled a grey mist over the fields, orchards and gardens and was accompanied by tattered clouds that raced madly across the sky.

BOOKS

In the workers' quarters on Sunday, the labourer Vasily, Mishka Koryashonok, Leksyia the shepherd boy, and Artyom, a tall bony man with a long crooked nose, were playing cards. Artyom had been day labourer all his life, he had always wanted to marry but the girls would not have him. Some short time before he had begun to take notice of Dunyasha, a pretty, rosy-cheeked girl who looked after the dairy. All day long she ran back and forth from the cowshed to the cellars or the kitchen, her galvanized iron pails clanging; she always smelt of fresh milk and when she went out the snowflakes seemed to sparkle on her cheeks. She was a girl full of laughter. Wherever Artyom was—whether he was carrying bran from the barns or cleaning out the sheppens—if he saw Dunyasha, he would stick his pitchfork into the ground and go after her, walking on his long legs with the gait of a camel.

Going up to Dunyasha he would take off his cap and bow.

"Good morning, Dunya."

"Good morning." Dunyasha would put down her pails and cover her mouth with the corner of her apron.

"Still running about with the milk, Dunya?"

Then Dunyasha would stoop down—it was so funny she could not stand it any longer—pick up the pails and run along the icy path to the cellar where she would drop the pails on the floor with a bang; in her rapid speech she told the housekeeper, Vasilisa: "That camel is asking me to marry him again. Ooh, Mamma, I'll die!" and she laughed so merrily that she could be heard all over the yard.

Nikita went into the workers' quarters. Today they were making a stew of sheep's heads and there was a fine smell of boiled mutton and freshly baked bread. At the door, where an earthenware water jug with a spout hung over a water butt, there lay grey snow brought in from the street. Pakhom sat on a bench by the stove, his black hair falling on to his pock-marked forehead and his frowning brows. He was stitching the shaft of a boot: with his bradawl he carefully pierced the hole in the leather, held back his head, squinted, threaded a hog bristle on to his wax end, stabbed it into the hole and grasping the boot shaft tightly between his knees pulled the thread through in both directions. He looked frowningly at Nikita for he was very angry: today he had quarreled with the cook who had hung his foot-cloths up to dry and had burned them.

The card players sat at the table in their clean Sunday shirts, their heads neatly oiled and combed. Only Artyom wore a ragged homespun jacket and had not combed his hair: there was nobody to look after him and wash his shirts. The card players slammed their sticky, smelly cards down on the table, shouting.

"That's ten to you."

"And fifty for you."

"D'you see that?"

"And what about that?"

"Game!"

"Eh?"

"Hold your nose out, Artyom."

"Why me?" asked Artyom, looking at the cards in astonishment. "That's wrong, it's a mistake."

"Hold out your nose."

Artyom took a card in each hand and covered his eyes with them.

The labourer, Vasily, took three cards and began to hit slowly at Artyom's long nose with them. The other players watched Artyom, counted the blows and told him angrily not to budge.

Nikita sat down to play with them, immediately lost a game and got fifteen blows on the nose. Just then Pakhom, placing the hoot shaft and the bradawl under the bench, said sternly:

"Some people would be coming back from mass now but these don't even bother to cross their foreheads—they go straight to the cards. Before we know where we are they'll be eating meat during Lent. . . . Stepanida," he shouted, getting up and going towards the water jug, "get dinner ready!"

In the kitchen, Stepanida, the cook, was so scared that she dropped a saucepan lid. The workers gathered up the cards, Vasily turned towards the corner where there was a paper icon covered with the marks of black beetles and began to cross himself.

Stepanida brought in a wooden bowl with sheep's heads in it: the cook turned her head away as the fragrant steam that rose from the dish enveloped her head. The workers sat down to table silently and seriously, taking a spoon each. Vasily began cutting bread into long slices, gave a slice to each of the workers and then rapped on the wooden bowl with a spoon and they all fell to. The sheephead stew was good.

Pakhom did not sit down with the others, he merely took a piece of bread and returned to the bench by the stove. The cook brought him some boiled potatoes and a wooden saltcellar. He was observing the Lenten fast.

"Foot-cloths," Pakhom said to her, carefully breaking a steaming potato in two and dipping a half into the saltcellar. "You burnt the foot-cloths, again I say you're an old hag, again I say you're a fool. And that's that..."

Nikita went out into the yard. It was a dull day. A heavy wet wind was blowing. Horse dung had begun to show through, giving the grey snow, powdery like salt, a yellowish tinge. The sleigh road that turned towards the dam, covered with dung and with numerous puddles on it, was higher than the surrounding snowfield. The log walls of the sheds and barns, the blackened straw thatch, the big, unpainted timber house, everything was black, grey and clearly defined.

Nikita walked over to the dam. From the distance he could hear the rustling of the wet trees, so loud that it seemed as though water were pouring through sluice gates some distance away. The swaying crowns of the willows were hidden in the low, flying, tattered clouds. In the clouds, amongst the waving branches, black birds were flying round in circles and screeching with hoarse alarmed cries.

Nikita stood there with his head thrown back and his mouth open. These birds seemed to have come out of the heavy, wet wind, they seemed to have been carried along with the clouds, and hanging on to the noisy rocking willows they screamed about turbulent, fearful and happy times; Nikita held his breath and his heart beat faster.

These were the rocks that flew back to their old places, to their damaged nests, with the first spring storm. Spring had come.

THE HOUSE ON WHEELS

The wet wind blew for three days, eating away the snow. On the higher places patches of black ploughland showed through the snow. The air smelled of thawing snow, of horse dung and cattle. When the doors of the cowshed were opened

the cows went down to the well pressing close against each other, clashing their horns and lowing loudly. The bull Bayan roared savagely as he smelled the spring wind. Mishka Koryashonok and Leksya with their whips drove the cattle back into sheds that smelled of dung. They opened the doors of the stables and the horses came out sleepily as though they were drunk, their coats dark and moulting, their manes long and tangled and their bellies distended. Vesta was foaling in a loose-box beside the stable. Wet blackbirds, bustling about aimlessly and screaming, flew over the roofs. Round at the back, behind the cellars, the crows crowded round some carrion that had appeared from under the snow. The trees were noisy, noisy with a harsh, menacing sound. In the trees and clouds over the dam the rooks cawed as they flew about.

Nikita had a headache during all these days. Sleepy and worried he wandered about the yard, along the water-swollen roads, went to the threshing barns where the broken stacks of chaff smelt of grain dust and mice. He was vaguely troubled as though something awful were going to happen, something that could be neither understood nor forgiven. Everything, the earth, wild beasts, cattle, birds, were no longer friendly and understandable to him, they had been alienated, were hostile and malicious. Something was about to happen, something incomprehensible, so sinful that you could die. Nevertheless, sleepy and made dizzy by the wind, the smell of carrion, the horses hoofs, the dung and the crumbling snow he was bothered by a curiosity that drew him on to what was happening around him.

When he returned home wet, wild-looking and smelling of dogs his mother looked at him attentively, without any tenderness and with a look of condemnation. He did not know what had made her angry and this oppressed him still more; it worried Nikita. During the past few days he had done nothing bad but still felt anxious as though he were guilty of some great

sin that for no apparent reason was sweeping across the whole earth.

Nikita walked along the windward side of the strawstacks. In this stack there were still the holes that the workers and the girls had dug out in the autumn when they were threshing the last of the wheat. At night the people would creep into the holes and caves to sleep. Nikita remembered the talk he had heard in the darkness under the warm, smelly straw. The stack seemed a terrible place.

Nikita walked on to the ploughman's booth that stood near the threshing barn, a little plank house on wheels. The door of the caravan, hanging from one hinge, creaked dismally in the wind. The caravan was empty. Nikita entered it by the little five-rung ladder. It had a little window with four tiny panes of glass. There was still snow lying on the floor. On the shelf that ran along one wall high up under the roof lay a gnawed wooden spoon that had been there since the previous autumn, a bottle that had held vegetable oil and the handle of a knife. The wind howled over the roof. Nikita stood there and thought that now he was alone and forlorn, that nobody loved him, that everybody was angry with him. Everything in the world was wet, black and evil. His eyes grew moist, he was very sorry for himself: why should he not be—alone in all the world, in an empty booth....

"Lord," said Nikita in a low voice and cold shivers immediately ran down his back, "Oh, Lord, let everything be good again. Let Mamma love me, let me obey Arkady Ivanovich.... Let the sun come out and the grass grow.... Let the rooks not scream so terribly.... Let me not hear how Bayan the bull roars.... Lord, let things be good again for me...."

As Nikita said these words he bowed his head and hurriedly crossed himself. When he had finished his prayer, looking up at the wooden spoon, the oil bottle and the knife handle, he really did feel easier. He stood for a little while longer

in that little house with the tiny window and then went back home.

The little house really had helped. As he was taking his coat off in the entrance hall, his mother looked at him as she passed in the way she always looked at him nowadays—attentively with her severe grey eyes—and suddenly smiled tenderly and passed her hand over Nikita's head.

"Well, have you run about long enough?" she asked. "Do you want your tea?"

THE UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE OF VASILY NIKITIEVICH

That night the rain came at last, a real downpour that beat so heavily on the window and the iron roof that Nikita awoke, sat up in bed and smiled.

The rain has a wonderful sound at night. "Sleep, sleep, sleep," it drummed against the glass and in the darkness the wind tore at the poplar trees in front of the house.

Nikita turned his pillow over, cold side up, lay down again and turned and twisted under the knitted woolen blanket until he had made himself comfortable. "Everything will be terribly, terribly good," he thought and dropped down into the soft warm clouds of sleep.

In the morning it had stopped raining but the sky was laden with heavy wet clouds that were floating from south to north. Nikita looked out of the window and gasped. Not a trace of the snow was left. The extensive yard was covered with blue puddles that were ruffled by the wind. The sleigh track stretched through the puddles, across the flattened brown grass and had not yet completely disappeared. The soaking wet lavender-coloured branches of the poplars were shaking with lively joy. From the south a patch of dazzling blue sky appeared through the torn clouds and with terrific speed flew over the house.

At breakfast Mamma was worried and kept looking at the windows.

"This is the fifth day we've had no mail," she said to Arkady Ivanovich, "I don't know why. . . . Now the floods have come and the roads will be impassable for another fortnight. . . . Such thoughtlessness is terrible."

Nikita realized that Mamma was talking about his father whom they expected to arrive any day. Arkady Ivanovich went to talk with the steward and find out whether it would be possible to send a horseman for the mail, but immediately returned to the dining room and spoke in a loud voice that had unusual tones in it.

"Oh, Lord, what is happening! . . . Go out and listen to the noise the water is making."

Nikita threw open the doors leading to the porch. The whole sharp, fresh air was filled with the strong soft sound of falling water. The sound came from the countless streams of thawed snow that ran along furrows, ditches and canals into the gullies. Gullies filled to the brim carried the spring waters to the river. Breaking through the ice the river overflowed its banks, and twirling ice floes and bushes torn up by the roots, was racing along high over the dam and down into the mill-pools.

The azure patch that had flown over the house burst and drove away all the clouds; a cold blue light lit up the sky, turning the pools in the yard a deep, bottomless blue; there were flashing reflections in the rivulets and the huge lakes in the fields and the brimming gullies all reflected the sun in rays of light.

"Good God, what wonderful air," said Mamma pressing her hands to her breast under her woolen shawl. Her face was smiling and there were green flashes in her eyes. When she smiled, Mamma was more beautiful than anybody else on earth.

Nikita went round the yard to see what was happening there. There were rivulets everywhere, some of them disappearing un-

der the grey, crumbling snowdrifts that sighed and collapsed when you put your foot on them. No matter which way you went there was water everywhere: the house was like an island. Nikita only managed to get as far as the smithy which stood on a low hill. Down an already drying slope he ran to the gully. Sweeping over the grass of last year the clear, fragrant snow water raced along. He picked up a handful and drank it.

Farther down the gully the snow still lay in yellow and blue patches. In some places the water cut through the patches in a stream, in others it flowed over the top of the snow. God help anybody who got caught in one of these patches of snow mush with a horse. Nikita walked along the grass beside the gully: he thought how good it would be to swim in the spring waters from gully to gully past the drying but still soggy banks and across the big lakes whose surfaces were ruffled by the spring wind.

On the far side of the gully lay a level field, brown in some places, still snow-covered in others, all sparkling with the ruffled surface of its many rivulets. In the distance five horsemen were slowly crossing the field on unsaddled horses. The leader turned round and apparently shouted something to the others, waving a coil of rope. Nikita knew by the piebald horse that the rider was Artamon Tyurin. The last rider held a long pole over his shoulder. The horsemen rode on towards Khomyakovka, a village that lay on the far side of the river beyond the gullies. It was very strange to see the men riding across the flooded fields where there was no visible road.

Nikita went down to the lower pond into which the gully poured its wide foaming waters over the yellow snow. The water covered the whole ice of the pond, traveling in little waves. To the left the willows, thawed out, bushy and huge, were rustling noisily. The rooks, wet from the night's rain, sat amongst the bare swaying branches.

A horseman appeared on the dam amongst the twisted trunks of the willows. His heels were beating away at the sides of a

sorry nag, he rolled in his seat and flapped his elbows up and down. It was Styopka Karnaushkin, he shouted something to Nikita as he galloped past across the pools of water; lumps of muddy snow and splashes of water flew from the hoofs of his horse.

Obviously something had happened. Nikita ran to the house. By the back porch, its sides pumping, stood Karnaushkin's nag; it tossed its head at Nikita. He ran into the house just in time to hear his mother's short, loud shriek of fear. She appeared from the end of the corridor, her face distorted, her eyes dilated with terror. Styopka appeared behind her and Arkady Ivanovich came running out of a door on the other side. Mamma did not walk but flew down the corridor.

"Hurry, hurry," she cried, throwing open the kitchen door, "Stepanida, Dunya, run to the workers' quarters! Vasily Nikitievich is drowning near Khomyakovka. . . ."

The worst thing of all was that it was "near Khomyakovka." Everything went black before Nikita's eyes: the passage was suddenly filled with the smell of fried onions. Mamma said afterwards that Nikita screwed up his eyes and screamed like a rabbit. He did not remember that scream, however. Arkady Ivanovich grabbed hold of him and took him into the schoolroom.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Nikita, a big lad like you," he kept repeating, squeezing Nikita's two arms just above the elbow. "What about it, what about it? Vasily Nikitievich will be coming soon. . . . He's obviously fallen into a ditch and got a soaking. . . . And that idiot of a Styopka has scared your mother. . . . On my word of honour I'll pull his ears off. . . ."

Still Nikita could see that Arkady Ivanovich's lips were twitching and that the pupils of his eyes had narrowed to pin-points.

In the meantime Mamma, wearing only her shawl, had run to the workers' quarters although the workers already knew and were at the carriage house fussing about trying to harness the big, strong, bad-tempered stallion Nero to a flat-bottomed

sleigh: in the horse pasture they caught riding horses: one man was pulling a long-handled boat hook down from the thatched roof, another ran up with a spade, another with a coil of rope; Dunyasha ran out of the house, her arms filled with a long sheepskin greatcoat and a heavy fur coat. Pakhom went up to Mamma.

"Pull yourself together, Alexandra Leontievna, send Dunka to the village for vodka. As soon as we bring him give him the vodka to drink..."

"Pakhom, I'm coming with you..."

"Not for anything, go home, you'll catch cold."

Pakhom sat sideways in the sleigh and took a firm hold of the reins. "Let him go!" he shouted to the boys who held the bridle. Nero plunged in the shafts, groaned, took off with a jerk and easily pulled the sleigh over the mud and puddles. The workers followed in a close group behind him flogging their horses with ropes.

Mamma stood still for a long time looking after them, then walked slowly back to the house with her head bowed. Mamma sat down at the window of the dining room from which the open field was visible and, away beyond the hills, the tops of the willows of Khomyakovka: she sent for Nikita. He ran in, threw his arms round her neck and leaned his head against the woollen shawl over her shoulders...

"God protect us from all misfortune, Nikitushka," said Mamma softly and pressed her lips hard and long against Nikita's hair.

Arkady Ivanovich came into the room several times, adjusted his glasses and rubbed his hands. Several times Mamma went out on to the porch to see whether they were coming yet, returned to the window and did not let Nikita leave her side.

The daylight had already turned to a faint lavender before sunset, the lower parts of the windowpanes were covered with light frost patterns for it was cold at night. Quite suddenly they heard the beat of a horse's hoofs right outside the house and

they saw Nero with a foam-flecked mouth, Pakhom sitting sideways on the edge of the sleigh and in the sleigh itself, under a pile composed of the sheepskin greatcoat, the fur coat and a piece of felt they could distinguish the red, smiling face of Vasily Nikitievich peeping out from the sheepskin; in place of a moustache he had two enormous icicles. Mamma cried out, jumped up and her face was twitching.

"He's alive!" she cried and the tears flowed from her sparkling eyes.

HOW I ALMOST DROWNED

Father sat in a huge leather armchair that had been pulled up to the round table in the dining room. Vasily Nikitievich was dressed in a soft camel-hair dressing gown and soft felt boots. His moustaches and his damp chestnut beard had been combed in two parts and his merry red face was reflected in the samovar; the samovar, like everything else that evening, had something special about the way it bubbled and spat sparks out of the grill below.

Vasily Nikitievich sat with his eyes screwed up with pleasure and with the vodka he had drunk, and his white teeth showed up with great brilliance. Although Mamma was still wearing the same plain grey dress and the woolen shawl she seemed quite different, not a bit like herself—she could not hold back her smiles, her lips wrinkled and her chin trembled. Arkady Ivanovich had put on his new tortoise-shell glasses that he kept for special occasions. Nikita knelt on a chair, his stomach pressed against the table, and was breathlessly listening to his father. Every minute Dunyasha ran in and out, took something, brought something and stared at the master. Stepanida brought in some special fried cakes in a heavy cast-iron frying pan and as they stood on the table they sizzled in the butter looking delicious. Vasily Vasilievich the cat, his tail held up straight, walked back and forth and round and round the leather armchair, rub-

bing his back, his sides and his head against it, purring merrily and unnaturally loudly. The pig's snout of Akhilka the hedgehog peeped out from under the sideboard, his needles lay flat on his back showing that he was also glad.

Father ate a hot cake with great satisfaction—good old Stepanida!—took another, rolled it up in a tube and ate that too—good old Stepanida!—took a long sip of tea with cream, stroked his moustaches and screwed up one eye.

"Now let me tell you how I almost drowned," and he began to tell his story. "I left Samara the day before yesterday. It's like this, Sasha," for a moment he was serious, "I had made a very profitable purchase: that Pozdyunin kept worrying me to buy his dark-bay stallion, Byron. 'What do I want your stallion for?' I asked him. 'Come and look at it,' he said. I saw the stallion and took a liking to it. A beauty. Smart, too. He looked at me with his violet eyes and almost said, 'Buy me.' And Pozdyunin kept after me all the time to buy the horse. And he had a sleigh and harness as well. . . . Sasha, you're not angry with me for making that purchase, are you?" Father took mother's hand in his. "Forgive me." Mamma even closed her eyes—how could she be angry today even if he had bought Pozdyunin, the chairman of the Zemstvo, himself. "So I ordered Byron to be brought to me and then wondered what I should do with him. I didn't want to leave the horse alone in Samara. I packed a lot of presents into a bag," father closed one eye roguishly, "Byron was harnessed for me at dawn and I left Samara alone. At first there was still snow left in some places but soon the whole road was so washed out that my stallion was all of a lather and he began to stagger. I decided to spend the night in Koldyban with Father Vozdvizhensky. The priest treated me to some sausage—just marvelous! All right, then. The priest said: 'Vasily Nikitievich, you can't get home, you'll see—the ice on the gullies is certain to break tonight.' But I had made up my mind to go whatever happened. And so I argued with the priest till midnight. He gave me such a wonderful black currant wine! Upon my word, if you took such

a liqueur to Paris the French would be crazy about it. . . . We'll speak about that later, though. I went to bed and then it began raining cats and dogs. You can imagine how miserable that made me feel, Sasha: There I was, twenty versts away from you and did not know when I should be able to reach you. . . . I'd had enough of the rain and the priest and the wine. . . ."

"Vasily," Mamma interrupted him and began looking at him severely, "I ask you very seriously never to take such risks again. . . ."

"I promise I won't, upon my word," said Vasily Nikitievich without pausing to think. "And so. . . . By morning the rain had stopped, the priest went to mass, I ordered Byron to be harnessed and drove off. Good Lord! There was nothing but water all round me. But it was easier going for the stallion. We had to travel without roads, knee-deep in water, across lakes. . . . Wonderful. . . . Sun, wind. . . . My sleigh was floating, my feet were wet. It was so good! At last I saw our willows in the distance. I passed Khomyakovka and started looking for the easiest place to cross the river. . . . The scoundrel!" Vasily Nikitievich struck his fist on the arm of the chair. "I'll show that Pozdyunin where bridges have to be built! I had to drive about three versts beyond Khomyakovka and then ford the river. He's a fine horse, Byron, pulled me straight up the steep bank. When the river was behind me I thought of the three gullies ahead, they'd be worse. There was no way back. I drove up to the first gully. Just imagine it, Sasha, the water mixed with snow was level with the banks. The big gully, you know, is about fifteen feet deep."

"Dreadful," said Mamma, turning pale.

"I unharnessed the stallion, took off the collar and saddle-pad and put them in the sleigh but I did not think to take my fur coat off—that was the cause of all the trouble. I climbed on to Byron's back—God bless me! The stallion jibbed at first. I stroked him. He smelled the water and snorted. He stumbled and then plunged into the gully, straight into the snow mush. He sank up to his neck and began to flounder but could not

budge an inch. I climbed down and also sank in the mush, only my head sticking out. I began twisting round in the mush, sort of half swimming, half crawling. The stallion saw that I was going away from him and he began neighing pitifully—don't leave me—he worked with his feet and crawled after me. He caught me up and his fore hoofs got entangled in the skirts of my open coat and dragged me into the water. I fought with all my strength but was dragged down deeper and deeper and there was no bottom under my feet. It was lucky the coat was unbuttoned and when I was struggling under the water the coat slipped off. It's still there on the bottom of the gully. I came to the surface, began to breathe again and lay spread-eagled on the mush like a frog; I heard a bubbling noise, looked round and saw that half the stallion's head was under water and bubbles were coming up from his nose—he had stepped on the reins. I had to return to him. I unfastened the buckle and tore the reins free. He turned his head and looked at me like a human being. We floundered for something like an hour in that mush. I felt that I had no more strength and was beginning to freeze. My heart began to grow cold. Just then I noticed that the stallion had stopped treading water, he had turned and was swimming—that meant we'd reached open water. It was easier to swim in the water and we were cast up on the far bank. Byron got out first on to the grass and I followed him. I caught hold of his mane and we walked along side by side both of us swaying. In front of us there were two more gullies. . . . Then I saw the men riding towards us. . . .”

Vasily Nikitievich said a few more indistinct words and suddenly dropped his head. His face was scarlet, his teeth were chattering.

“It's nothing, it's nothing, your samovar has gassed me,” he said, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The shivers began. He was put to bed in a delirium. . . .

PASSION WEEK

Father lay for three days in a fever and then came to himself; the first thing he asked was whether Byron was alive. The beautiful stallion was in the best of health.

Vasily Nikitievich's lively and jolly character soon had him on his feet again: this was not the time to lie in bed. The busy time preceding the spring planting had begun. In the smithy they were putting edges on the ploughshares and mending ploughs, shoeing all the horses. In the barns workers were shoveling over the musty grain, frightening the mice and raising clouds of dust. Under a shed the winnowing machine was whirring. In the house spring cleaning was well under way: windows were cleaned, floors washed, cobwebs swept down from the ceilings. The carpets, chairs and sofas were taken out on the balcony and the spirit of winter was beaten out of them. All the things that had become accustomed to lying in their own places during the winter were moved, cleaned of dust and newly arranged. Akhilka, who hated any bustle, was so angry that he went to sleep in a storeroom.

Mamma herself cleaned the dining-room silver and the silver frames of the icons, opened the old chests filling the air with a smell of moth balls, looked over the spring clothes that had been crushed in the chests but seemed like new from having been laid up during the winter. In the dining room there was a basket of hard-boiled eggs; Nikita and Arkady Ivanovich coloured them with a decoction of onion skins which made them yellow, wrapped them up in paper and dropped them into boiling water with vinegar which gave the eggs designs of different colours, they varnished them, gilded them and silvered them.

On Friday the whole house smelled of vanilla and cardamon—the cook had begun baking the Easter cakes. By evening on Mamma's bed a dozen big, tall sponge cakes and squat Easter yeast cakes were laid out under a clean towel.

All that week the weather had been uncertain—at first there

were heavy black clouds with a fall of powdery snow, then the sky cleared, the cold spring light shone out of a bottomless blue sky, then there was a blizzard of wet snow. At night the puddles froze over.

On Saturday the estate was empty—half the people from the house and from the workers' quarters had gone to the church at Kolokoltsovka, a village seven versts away, to attend High Mass.

Mamma felt poorly that day—she had worked too hard all the week. Father said that immediately after supper he would go to bed. Arkady Ivanovich who was waiting all the time for a letter from Samara did not get one and sat in his room with the door locked, gloomy as a raven.

They told Nikita that if he wanted to go to High Mass he must find Artyom and tell him to harness the mare Aphrodite to the gig: the mare had been shod on all four feet. He would have to leave before dark and put up with an old friend of Vasily Nikitievich's who kept a grocer's shop in Kolokoltsovka, Pyotr Petrovich Devyatov. "Incidentally, he has a house full of children and you're always alone, it's bad for you," said Mamma.

At dusk Nikita got into the gig beside big Artyom, who wore a new girdle low down on his ragged homespun coat. "Come on, darling, help us," said Artyom, and old Aphrodite with her drooping neck and heavy hind quarters set off at a trot.

They drove out of the yard, past the blacksmith's shop and crossed the gully with water up to the step. For some reason Aphrodite kept turning her head and looking back at Artyom. The blue of the evening was reflected in the puddles that were covered with a thin crust of ice. The horse's hoofs crunched along and the gig rattled. Artyom sat in gloomy silence—he was thinking of his unhappy love for Dunyasha. In the greenish sky, in the faint strip of sunset a single star sparkled like a speck of ice.

PYOTR PETROVICH'S CHILDREN

Right up under the ceiling, a lamp with a turned-down, stinking blue flame hung in an iron hoop. On two cloth-covered feather beds that lay on the floor and smelled pleasantly of home and boys lay Nikita and the six sons of Pyotr Petrovich—Volodya, Kolya, Lyoshka, Lyonka the whiner and the two little ones whose names didn't interest him.

The eldest boys were telling stories in a low voice. Lyonka the whiner was constantly in trouble, had his ear pulled or his head punched so that he would not whine. The little ones were asleep, their noses buried in the feather bed.

Pyotr Petrovich's seventh child was a girl, Anna, the same age as Nikita—freckle-faced with round eyes like a bird's that bore no trace of a smile and a nose that was dark with freckles; from time to time she appeared noiselessly in the door of the boys' room. Then one of the boys would say to her:

"Anna, keep out, or I'll get up in a minute...."

And Anna would disappear as silently as she had come. It was quiet in the house.

Pyotr Petrovich was a church warden and had gone off to church at dusk.

Maria Mironovna, his wife, said to the children:

"You just make a noise, and I'll knock your heads off...."

She lay down to rest before the early morning High Mass. The children were ordered not to run about. Lyoshka, a round-faced boy with a forelock and his front teeth missing, was telling a tale.

"Last Easter we rolled eggs and I won two hundred of them. I ate and ate until my belly was like this."

From behind the door Anna had her say, afraid that Nikita might believe Lyoshka.

"That's a whopper. Don't you believe him."

"I'm certainly going to get up...." threatened Alyoshka. There was silence behind the door.

●

Volodya, the eldest, a swarthy, curly-headed boy, sat up in bed.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the belfry and ring the bells," he told Nikita. "When I begin to ring the whole belfry trembles. I ring the little bells with my left hand—ding, ding—and with this hand I pull the big bells—boom. The big 'un weighs a hundred thousand poods."

"A whopper," came the whisper from behind the door.

Volodya turned round so quickly that his curls flew round his head.

"Anna!... And our papa's awful strong," he said. "Papa can pick up a horse by its forelegs... I can't do that yet, of course, but if you come and see us in the summer we'll go out to the pond. Our pond is six versts long. I can climb up a tree, up to the very top and dive head first into the water from there."

"And I can stay under water without breathing and can see under water," said Lyoshka. "Last summer we went bathing and I got worms and fleas and beetles—as big as this—in my head..."

"A whopper," came the scarcely audible whisper from behind the door.

"Anna, I'll get your pigtail!..."

"That girl's just a nuisance," said the annoyed Volodya, "she's always poking her nose in our business and then complains to mother that we hit her."

There was a sob behind the door. The third boy, Kolya, lying on his side with his head supported on his fist, was all the time staring at Nikita with his kindly but rather sad eyes. His face was long in shape and had a modest look about it; there was a wide space between the base of his nose and his upper lip. When Nikita turned towards him he smiled with his eyes.

"Can you swim?" Nikita asked him.

Kolya's eyes laughed. Volodya said carelessly:

"He's the one that reads all the books. In summer he lives on the roof in a tent—yes, a tent on the roof. He lies and reads. Papa wants to send him to the town school. I'm going to look after the shop. Lyoshka is still small so he can run around for a while. Our trouble is this one, the whiner," he pulled Lyonka's topknot, "he's such a hateful kid. Papa says he's got worms."

"He's got nothing of the sort. I've got terrible worms," said Lyoshka, "because I eat burdocks and acacia pods and I can eat tadpoles."

"A whopper," came the groan from behind the door again.

"Now you'll get it, Anna," and Lyoshka jumped up and made for the door knocking against the baby, who did not wake up but whimpered in his sleep. It sounded as though leaves were being blown down the corridor—of course there was not a trace of Anna, only the sound of a door closing in the distance. As Lyoshka came back he said: "She's run to mother. Never mind, she won't get away from me: I'll stuff her head full of burrs."

"Leave her alone, Alyosha," said Kolya "What do you keep after her for?"

Alyoshka, Volodya and even Lyonka the whiner pounded on him:

"We don't keep after her! She hangs on to us. If you go a thousand versts away and look round you'll see her trotting along behind.... There's nothing suits her—we don't tell the truth, do what we're told not to...."

And Lyoshka said:

"Once I sat amongst the reeds in the water all day long so as not to see her and the leeches ate me up."

And Volodya said:

"When we sat down to dinner she immediately told mother—'Mamma, Volodya has caught a mouse, he's got it in his pocket.' And for all she knows that mouse may be the dearest thing in the world to me."

And Lyonka the whiner said:

"She's always standing there looking at you until you want to cry."

As they complained to Nikita about Anna the boys quite forgot that they had been ordered to lie there quietly and not to talk before mass. Suddenly they heard the deep, threatening voice of Maria Mironovna calling from the distance:

"A thousand times I have to tell you. . . ."

The boys stopped talking immediately. Then whispering and pushing each other they began to pull on their boots and don their sheepskin coats; they wound scarves round their necks and ran out into the street.

Maria Mironovna came out in a new plush coat and a shawl decorated with roses. Anna, wrapped up in a big shawl, was holding her mother's hand.

It was a starry night. There was a smell of earth and frost in the air. People were walking along the line of dark cabins in silence, the ice of the puddles, in which the stars were reflected, crunching under their feet—men, women and children on their way to church. The golden dome of the church on the market square could be seen in the distance reaching up into the high heavens. Below the dome oil wicks in saucers arranged in three tiers were burning. A light breeze touched the flames gently.

FIRMNESS OF SPIRIT

After mass they returned home to the festive board where there were red paper roses on the pyramids of sweet cheese, on the Easter cakes and even pinned to the wall. A canary in a cage hanging by the window was twittering—she was worried by the light of the lamp. Pyotr Petrovich, in a long, black flock coat, laughing into his Tatar moustaches—such was his habit—poured out little glasses of cherry liqueur for everybody. The children began shelling eggs and licking their spoons. Maria Mironovna was so tired that she sat down in her shawl—she

was too tired even to eat, she could do nothing but wait until the gang, as she called the children, had settled down.

Nikita had scarcely lain down on the bed under the blue light of the lamp and covered himself with his sheepskin coat before his ears were filled by the singing of thin, chilly voices: "Christ is arisen from the dead, by His death He has conquered death. . . ." And again he saw the white plank walls, the light of countless candles before the gold-leaf frames of the icons; and through the bluish clouds of incense up above him, right under the star-spangled blue of the church dome, he saw a dove with outstretched wings. Outside the grilled window it was night, voices sang, there was a smell of sheepskins, of fresh red bunting—the light of the candles was reflected in thousands of eyes, the western doors opened and the standard-bearers came in, bending down as they entered the door. Everything bad that had been done in the course of the year was forgiven on that night. Anna, with her freckled nose and her two blue bows over her ears, stretched over to kiss her brothers. . . .

The morning of the next day was grey and warm. The glad tidings were rung out by all the bells. Nikita and the children of Pyotr Petrovich, even the smallest, went to the barns of the commune on the common. Colours were bright and the place was noisy from the big crowds there. The boys were playing tipcat, knucklebones and pickaback. Girls dressed in brightly coloured shawls and in new, billowing cotton dresses, sat on logs by the granary walls. Every one of them held a handkerchief filled with sunflower seeds, raisins and eggs. They nibbled the seeds, looking at the passers-by and laughing merrily.

Young Petka, the elder's son, lolled on the logs at the end, his legs clad in Sunday boots stuck out in front of him, running his fingers over the keys of an accordion; he did not look at anybody but suddenly burst out with a gay village melody.

A circle of lads stood at the other wall playing pitch and toss, each of them with a pile of copper coins in his fist. The one whose turn it was to toss would throw down a five-kopek

piece, dig his heel into the ground, put the toe of his boot against a five-kopek piece, kick it up and then toss it into the air shouting: "Heads or tails?"

Sitting on the ground nearby, where the buttercups were already peeping through last year's grass, the girls were playing at "find the eggs": a pile of chaff would be divided into two, a couple of eggs hidden in one half and the opponent had to guess which half they were in.

Nikita went up to the group playing "find the eggs," took an egg out of his pocket but immediately heard behind him the voice of Anna, who had come up suddenly, he knew not whence.

"Listen, don't you play with them, they'll cheat you, they'll take all your eggs."

Anna looked at Nikita with her round laughterless eyes and sniffed with her freckled nose. Nikita then went to the boys who were playing knucklebones but Anna again appeared from nowhere and whispered out of the corner of her mouth:

"Don't play with them, they're going to cheat you, I heard them."

Wherever Nikita went Anna flew after him like a leaf in the wind and whispered in his ear. Nikita did not know why she kept doing it. He felt very uncomfortable and ashamed, he could see that the boys were beginning to laugh at him and to stare at him.

"Plays with girls!" one of them shouted.

Nikita went to the cold, blue pond. Dirty melting snow still lay under the steep bank. In the distance the crows were whirling and screaming over the bare trees in the grove. . . .

"Listen," Anna again whispered behind his back, "I know where a suslik lives, d'you want to come and look at it?"

Nikita shook his head angrily without turning round.

"Honest, may my eyes burst, I'm not fooling you. Why don't you want to look at the suslik?" she whispered.

"I'm not going."

"All right. D'you want to pick buttercups and rub our eyes with them so that we won't be able to see anything?"

"No, I don't."

"So you don't want to play with me?..."

Anna pursed her lips, looked into the pond, at the rippled surface; the wind blew her tightly woven plait to one side, the tip of her freckled nose turned red, her eyes filled with tears and she blinked. Then Nikita realized what was the matter: Anna had been running after him all morning because she felt that same way about him as he did about Lilya.

Nikita walked away swiftly to the edge of the steep bank. If Anna had come after him again he would have jumped into the water, so uncomfortable and ashamed did he feel. He could not exchange those strange words, those meaning glances and smiles with anybody except Lilya. To have done so with any other girl would have been shameless treachery.

"The boys have told you to keep away from me," said Anna. "I'll tell Mummy about all of you. . . . I'll play by myself. . . . A lot I need you. . . . And I know where there's something. . . . Something interesting. . . ."

Nikita did not turn round, he could hear Anna muttering but he ignored her. His heart was hardened.

SPRING

You could no longer look up at the sun, it already poured its blinding rays down from the heavens. The clouds in the deep blue sky looked like lumps of snow. The spring breezes carried with them odours of fresh grass and birds' nests.

The big buds on the fragrant poplars in front of the house were bursting, chickens clucked in the sunshine. In the garden, green blades of grass peeped through the layer of rotting leaves; the whole field was covered with little white and yellow stars. The number of birds in the garden increased day by day. Black

thrushes darted about amongst the tree trunks—they moved on their feet with great agility. Orioles made their nests in the lime trees—these are big green birds with yellow down that gleams like gold under their wings—and they were fussing about and chirping with their melodious voices.

As soon as the sun came up the starlings on the roofs and in the bird-cotes awoke and added their various voices to the chorus, imitating now nightingales, now larks and then some sort of African birds that they had heard during their winter abroad—scoffing and screaming in horribly unmusical voices. A woodpecker made a patch of grey as he flew through the transparent birches, alighted on a trunk, looked around him and raised his red crest.

On a sunny Sunday morning the cuckoo added his note from the still dew-laden trees by the pond: his sad, lonely and tender voice gave its blessing to every living thing in the garden, beginning with the worms.

“Live, love and laugh, cuckoo! I am living alone, not bothering anyone, cuckoo!...”

The whole garden listened to the cuckoo in silence. The ladybirds, the birds, the eternally astonished frogs squatting on their bellies in the roads and on the balcony steps, were all trying to guess their fate. The cuckoo finished her song and the garden noises took on a jollier air—the leaves began to rustle.

One day Nikita was sitting on the edge of a roadside ditch with his chin in his hands, watching a drove of horses in the level green pasture on the bank of the upper pond. Stately geldings, their tails swishing, lowered their heads and tore at the short grass: mares turned their heads to see whether their foals were following them; the foals on their thin legs with bulbous knees frisked around their dams as though afraid to go too far away; from time to time they nuzzled under their mothers' bellies, took their fill of milk, their tails held high—it was good to get a drink of milk on that spring day.

The three-year-old mares left the herd and dashed round

the field, whinnying, kicking and bucking and tossing their heads; one of them began rolling on the grass, another bared her teeth, whinnied and tried to bite her.

Vasily Nikitievich, in a linen coat, drove a droshky down the road past the dam. His beard was blown to one side, his eyes were screwed up merrily and there was a speck of mud on his cheek. When he saw Nikita he reined in his horse.

"Which horse in the drove do you like best?"

"What for?"

"Without any 'what fors'."

Nikita screwed his eyes up like his father and pointed to a dark roan gelding called Klopik; he had had his eye on the horse for a long time mostly because it had a good, mild and unusually kindly head.

"That one."

"Excellent. You can go on liking it."

Vasily Nikitievich screwed one eye up tight, smacked his lips, shook the reins and the powerful stallion pulled the droshky easily along the smooth road. Nikita looked after his departing father: no, he thought, he hadn't been asked for nothing.

RAISING THE FLAG

The sparrows awoke Nikita. He listened and heard the sweet voices, like a whistle blown under water, of an oriole. The window was open, there was a smell of grass and freshness in the room, and the sun's rays were broken by the wet foliage. A breeze was blowing and drops of dew fell on the window sill. The voice of Arkady Ivanovich came to him from the garden.

"Hi. Admiral. show a leg!"

"I'm getting up!" shouted Nikita but he lay in bed for another minute; it was a wonderful thing when you woke up

to hear the voice of the oriole and look out of the window at the wet foliage.

It was Nikita's birthday, the 11th May, and it was to be celebrated by raising the flag on the pond. Nikita unhurriedly—he did not want the time to pass too rapidly—put on a new shirt, flowered on a blue background, and new breeches that were so strong that he could hang on to any branch of a tree and they would not tear. Satisfied with himself he brushed his teeth.

A big bunch of lilies of the valley stood on the snow-white tablecloth in the dining room and the whole place was filled with their perfume. Mamma pulled Nikita towards her and, forgetting his rank of admiral, stood for a long time stroking his face and kissing him as though she had not seen him for a year. His father stroked his beard, rolled his eyes and made his report:

"I have the honour to inform your excellency that according to the information provided by the Georgian Calendar and in conformity with the computations made by the world's astronomers, you reach the age of ten this day for which accomplishment I present you with this penknife containing twelve blades, a fine thing for naval work and to lose."

After breakfast they went down to the pond. Vasily Nikitievich, puffing out his cheeks importantly, whistled a naval march.

Mamma laughed loudly at him—she lifted her skirts so that the hem would not get wet from the dew on the grass. Behind them walked Arkady Ivanovich with the oars and a boathook over his shoulder. Beside the bathhouse on the bank of the huge serpentine pond a flagstaff with a hull on top had been erected. The boat stood by the bank, its red and green lines reflected in the water. The population of the pond—the water beetles, larvae and tiny tadpoles—swam about under the boat's lee. Spiders with cushions on their feet ran along the surface of the water. The rooks looked down at them from their nests in the willows.

Vasily Nikitievich fastened the admiral's personal pennant to the halyard—the device was a red frog standing on its hind legs on a field of green. Puffing out his cheeks he began hauling on the halyard, the pennant ran up the mast and broke at the top. The rooks flew up from their nests in the willows, screaming in alarm.

Nikita got into the boat and took his place at the tiller. Arkady Ivanovich took the oars. The boat settled deeper into the water, swayed and moved off from the bank gliding over the mirrorlike surface of the pond which reflected the willows, the green shade beneath them, the birds and the clouds. The boat was floating between earth and sky. A cloud of gnats gathered over Nikita's head—they swarmed together and followed the boat.

"Full speed ahead, full speed!" shouted Vasily Nikitievich from the bank.

Mamma waved her hand and laughed. Arkady Ivanovich lay on his oars and out of the low green reeds came two quacking ducks, half swimming, half flying in their terror.

"Board her, Admiral of the Frogs! Hurr-a-a-ah!" shouted Vasily Nikitievich.

ZHELTUKHIN

Zheltukhin was sitting on a tuft of grass in the sun in the corner between the porch and the wall of the house; with fear in his heart he watched the approaching Nikita.

Zheltukhin's head was resting on his back, his beak with the yellow strip running right down it, lay on his fat crop. All Zheltukhin's feathers were ruffled, his legs were drawn up under his belly. When Nikita bent over him he opened his beak to frighten the boy. Nikita held him between his two hands. It was a starling, still grey in colour, that had apparently tried to fly away from its nest but its unskilled wings would not

support it and it had fallen to the ground and taken refuge in the corner on dandelion leaves pressed close to the earth.

Zheltukhin's heart beat in despair: "Before I can let out a gasp," he thought, "he'll eat me." He knew very well, of course, how to eat worms, flies and caterpillars.

The boy lifted him to his mouth. Zheltukhin's eyes were covered with a film, his heart jumped under his feathers. Nikita, however, only blew on his head and took him into the house: that meant that he was not hungry and would eat Zheltukhin later on.

When Alexandra Leontievna saw the starling she picked him up like Nikita did and blew on his head as he lay on her hand.

"He's so small, the poor little thing," she said. "Such a yellow beak, Zheltukhin." *

They placed the starling on the sill of a window that opened into the garden and was protected by gauze. The inside of the window was also lined with gauze half way up. Zheltukhin immediately cringed in the corner striving to show that he would not sell his life cheaply.

Outside, beyond the white gauze, the leaves rustled, the despised sparrows—the thieves and scoundrels—squabbled in the bushes. On the other side, also from behind the gauze, Nikita was looking at him and his eyes were big, they moved, were incomprehensible and enchanting. "I'm lost, I'm lost," thought Zheltukhin.

Still Nikita did not eat him right up to the evening, all he did was drop flies and worms over the gauze. "Fattening me up," thought Zheltukhin and squinted at the red blindworm that was wriggling like a snake in front of his nose. "I won't eat it, it isn't a real worm, it's a trick."

The sun sank below the trees. The grey, sleepy light pulled

* The name Zheltukhin comes from the Russian word "zholyty" meaning yellow.—*Trans.*

at his eyes but still Zheltukhin clung tightly to the window sill with his claws. There was no longer anything to be seen. The birds in the garden grew silent. There was a sweet, somnambulant odour of dampness and grass. His head sank deeper and deeper into his feathers. Ruffling his feathers in anger—in case of emergency—Zheltukhin lurched forward, then backward on to his tail and fell asleep.

The sparrows woke him up—they were creating a disturbance, fighting on the branches of a lilac tree. Wet leaves hung down in the greyish light. Sweetly and merrily, to the accompaniment of clucking, a starling sang in the distance. "I can't stand it, I'm so hungry that I feel sick," thought Zheltukhin and saw the worm that had crept halfway into a crack in the window sill, jumped on it, pulled it out by its tail and swallowed it. "Not bad, a tasty worm," he thought.

The light changed to blue. The birds began to sing. A bright, warm ray of sunshine fell on Zheltukhin through the leaves of the trees. "Well, we're still alive," thought Zheltukhin, hopped along, snapped up a fly and swallowed it.

At that moment there came the sound of footsteps, Nikita came to the window and pushed his huge hand behind the gauze: he opened his fingers and scattered flies and worms on the window sill. Zheltukhin cringed back into his corner in terror, spread his wings, looked at the hand but it hovered over his head and then disappeared behind the gauze; again those strange, absorbing, opalescent eyes stared at Zheltukhin.

When Nikita had gone, Zheltukhin preened his feathers and began to think: "So he didn't eat me although he could have. So he doesn't eat birds. Then there's nothing to be afraid of."

Zheltukhin ate his fill, preened his feathers with his bill, hopped along the window sill, looked out at the sparrows, saw an old one with tattered head feathers and began teasing him, turning his head back and forth and whistling: fuyoot, chillik—chillik, fuyoot. The sparrow grew angry, puffed up its chest and flew at Zheltukhin with open beak—and flew straight into

the gauze. "Got what was coming to you," thought Zheltukhin and strutted up and down the window sill.

Then Nikita came back again, thrust his hand behind the gauze, but this time it was empty and he held it too near the bird. Zheltukhin jumped at it and pecked at a finger with all his strength, jumped back and made ready for battle. But Nikita only opened his mouth and roared: "Ha, ha, ha."

And so the day passed, there was nothing to fear, the food was good if a little monotonous. Zheltukhin could scarcely wait for sundown and slept that night in complete satisfaction.

Next day, after he had had his breakfast, he began to look for a way to escape from behind the gauze. He hopped around the whole window but there was not a single crack anywhere. Then he jumped on to his dish and began to drink—he filled his beak with water, threw back his head and swallowed—a little round ball rolled down his throat.

It was a long day. Nikita brought worms and cleaned the window sill with a goose feather. Then the bald sparrow quarreled with a blackbird who struck him such a blow that he dropped through the leaves like a stone and looked up, all bristling.

For some reason or another a magpie flew right close to the window, trilled a few notes, darted about, wagged its tail and did nothing that had any sense to it.

A robin sang for a long time, sang sweetly about the hot sunlight, about honey in the clover—it made Zheltukhin so sad and there was such a gurgling in his throat, he too, wanted to sing, but where could he sing, not in the window, in a cage!...

He again made his tour of the window sill and saw a fearful animal: it crept along on short soft legs, its belly dragging along the floor. Its head was round, its sparse whiskers stood out stiff, its eyes were green, their narrow pupils gleaming with Satanic evil. Zheltukhin squatted down and did not budge.

Vasily Vasilievich, the cat, jumped softly, held on to the

edge of the window sill with his claws, looked through the gauze at Zheltukhin and opened his mouth.... Oh Lord, in the mouth ... longer than Zheltukhin's beak ... were fangs!... The cat struck out with his paw and tore the gauze.... Zheltukhin's heart sank, his wings hung down.... Just then and just in time, Nikita appeared and seized the cat by the loose skin on the back of his neck and hurled it towards the door. Vasily Vasilievich whined angrily and ran away with his tail down.

"There's no animal stronger than Nikita," thought Zheltukhin after this incident and when Nikita came again he let the boy stroke his head although he sat back on his tail in fear.

And so that day ended. The next morning a very happy Zheltukhin went on a tour of inspection around his premises and immediately remarked the hole in the gauze that the cat had made. Zheltukhin put his head through the hole, looked round, climbed out, sprang into the stream of light air and, flapping his wings frantically, flew along just above the floor.

When he reached the door he flew up into the other room where he saw four people seated at a round table. They were eating, they took up huge pieces of food and placed them in their mouths. All four of them turned their heads and, motionless, watched Zheltukhin. He knew that he should stop short in the air and turn round, but he could not make that difficult turn in flight, flopped over on to one wing and landed on the table between the jam dish and the sugar bowl. Then he noticed Nikita sitting in front of him. Without thinking Zheltukhin hopped on to the jam dish, from there on to Nikita's shoulder and there he sat with his feathers ruffled and his eyes even half-covered with film.

He remained seated on Nikita's shoulder for a while then flew up under the ceiling, caught a fly, alighted on the rubber plant in the corner, cruised round the candelabra, began to feel hungry and flew back to his own window where fresh worms were waiting for him.

Towards evening Nikita brought a little wooden house with a porch, a door and two windows and put it on the window sill. Zheltukhin liked it—the inside was dark, he hopped in, turned round a couple of times and then went to sleep.

That same night, Vasily Vasilievich, locked in a storeroom as punishment for his attempted crime, had mewed hoarsely and did not even want to catch mice—he just sat at the door and miauled so pitifully that he even felt uncomfortable himself.

The house now contained a third member of the animal kingdom—in addition to the hedgehog and the cat—Zheltukhin. He was very independent, clever and resourceful. He liked to listen to people talking and when they sat down to table he would listen, cock his head on one side and warble in singsong tones: "Sasha"—and would bow. Alexandra Leontievna believed that he was bowing to her. Whenever she saw Zheltukhin she would say to him: "Greetings, greetings, little birdie, full of life and joy." Zheltukhin would immediately hop on to the train of her dress and ride along with a very satisfied air.

And so he lived until autumn, he grew up, acquired big flashing black wings and feathers, learned to speak Russian well and lived almost all day in the garden, always returning to his little house on the window sill at dusk.

In August wild starlings enticed him into their flock, taught him to fly properly and when the leaves in the garden began to fall he flew off at break of day across the sea to Africa with the birds of passage.

KLOPIK

The spring work in the fields was over, the orchard had been dug up and watered and now there was nothing left to do until St. Peter's day when the mowing would begin. The draught horses were driven out with the herds into the meadows beyond

the pond where there was luscious grass; in the mornings there was bluish mist over the fields and the huge black poplars, each standing aloof from the others, seemed to be growing out of the opaque air and to be hanging over the earth.

Mishka Koryashonok remained with the herd to look after the horses. He rode in a high Cossack saddle, his bare feet in the stirrups and his elbows flapping.

Galloping across the green fields after a young mare that had strayed from the herd he cracked his whip like a pistol shot and shouted at her to get back. Then he would slip down from the unbridled horse that immediately began tearing at the grass with its dangling bit clanking and would either sit on the mound above the ditch and whittle sticks or would roll up his trousers, walk into the pond and pull the bulbs and roots of the reeds out of the warm water: the roots were long and black, like snakes. The bulbs had a sourish taste but the roots were floury and sweet although they made your tummy ache if you ate too many of them.

Nikita spent the whole day with Mishka in the field beyond the pond and learned to ride a horse.

It was not difficult to get into the saddle: the old flea-bitten grey stood quiet enough, only occasionally scratching its belly with its hind leg to brush away the horseflies. But when he had mounted, taken the reins and set the grey at a trot Nikita began to fall first to one side and then to the other. When the grey trotted about thirty paces and would then stop suddenly and put its head down to eat grass, Nikita would grasp the pommel of the saddle with all his strength and sometimes would even slide over the horse's neck and land at her feet; the old horse treated all this with absolute indifference.

Said Mishka:

"Don't be scared, falling doesn't hurt, only pull in your neck and don't, for God's sake, try to grab the ground with your hands, curl up in a ball. I'll show you how to do it without saddle or bridle, just jump on and fly away."

Mishka ran towards a group of three-year-olds that had never been backed and holding out his hand began to call them: "Feed, feed, feed..."

Star, a spoiled, thin-legged, dapple-grey mare, a lover of grain, came towards him, her ears flat and her velvet lips hunting for grain. Mishka began to scratch her neck. Star tossed her fine head, the scratching was pleasant and, in order to please Mishka, she took his shoulder in her teeth.

Mishka stroked her, ran his hand along her satin back—Star stepped back alarmed—seized her by the withers and sprang on to her back. Astonished and angry Star sprang to one side, tossed her head, bucked, squatted on her hinds, reared and then raced past the herd at a stretch gallop.

Mishka sat glued to her back. Suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks and backed, Mishka rolled over in a ball on the grass. He limped as he walked back to Nikita rubbing the blood away from his grazed cheek.

"Straight into the twigs that blasted mare threw me," he said, "but you can't do it, you're too fat."

"I'll break my neck but I'll learn to ride better than Mishka," thought Nikita.

He spoke about Star at the dinner table which worried Mamma rather a lot.

"Listen," she said, "I ask you not even to go near the unbroken horses," and she looked beseechingly at Vasily Nikitievich. "Vasya, at least you can support me... He'll end up by breaking his arms and legs..."

"Excellent," answered Vasily Nikitievich, "forbid him to ride and forbid him to walk while you're about it, he may fall and hurt his nose—put him in a jar, pack him in cotton wool and send him away to a museum..."

"It's what I expected," said Mamma, "I knew there wouldn't be a moment's peace for me this summer..."

"Sasha, you must understand that the boy's ten years old..."

"It's all the same...."

"Pardon me, please, I don't want him to grow up into a mollicoddle."

"All right, but that doesn't mean you can make him a present of Klopik immediately."

"In the first place, an infant in arms could ride Klopik."

"He's been shod."

"I have ordered him to be unshod."

"In that case do whatever you want, ride wild horses, break your necks," Mamma's eyes filled with tears, she got up quickly from the table and went into the bedroom.

Vasily Nikitievich rapidly stroked his beard into two parts, threw down his napkin and went to Mamma. Arkady Ivanovich, who had sat there all the time as though the conversation had nothing to do with him, looked at Nikita, adjusted his glasses, and said in a whisper:

"Things aren't going too well with you, brother."

"Arkady Ivanovich, tell Mamma that I won't fall, on my honour, I won't...."

"Patience, endurance and firmness of character," Arkady Ivanovich adroitly caught a fly that was persistently trying to settle on his nose, "are three qualities that are also needed if you want to ride well...."

There was a loud conversation going on in the bedroom all the time. Said Father's voice: "At his age boys are quite independent...." "Where are they independent?" asked Mamma's despairing voice.... "In America they're independent...." "That's not true...." "I tell you that in America ten-year-old boys are as independent as I am...." "My God but we're not in America...."

The talk about independence lasted a whole week. Mamma was already surrendering and looked sadly at Nikita, as though he were certain to be broken up but she hoped that he might manage to save his head.

During the same week Nikita was persistently taking riding

lessons in the field by the pond—Mishka praised him and taught him a rough-rider's trick—to take a running jump and vault on to the horse over its croup, like playing leap-frog.

"She can't buck you off, she can't do it in time, by the time she bucks you're already on her withers."

At long last, after breakfast on the balcony where the nasturtiums climbing up strings cast moving shadows on the tablecloth, plates and faces, Mamma called Nikita over, made him stand in front of her and said in a sad voice:

"You're ten years old, you know, and you must be independent, at your age other boys are quite, quite. . . ." her voice shook and she frowned slightly towards father. "In short, papa's right, you are no longer a child." Vasily Nikitievich dropped his eyes and drummed on the edge of the table with his fingers. "Tomorrow we are going to visit Chembulatova and you may ride over on Klopik. . . . Only I ask you, I beseech you. . . ."

"Mamma, on my word of honour nothing will happen to me," and Nikita kissed Mamma's eyes, cheeks, chin and hands that smelled of berries.

The next day, after an early dinner, Vasily Nikitievich told Nikita to take his saddle—an English grey morocco-leather saddle presented to him at Christmas—and told him as they walked across the grass to the stables:

"You must learn to groom a horse, to saddle it and to rub it down after a ride. . . . The horse must be properly curried, he must be clean. . . . If he is, you're a good cavalryman."

In the wide-open carriage house a three-horse team was being harnessed to a carriage. Sergei Ivanovich the coachman, in his sleeveless jacket, crimson shirt but an ordinary cap—he only donned his feather hat when he was ready to mount the box—was adjusting the traces and cursing Artyoin, who was helping him.

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"What are you putting the strap under his chest for, ignoramus! This is a carriage harness. Don't touch the throatlash. You couldn't harness a cat to a basket."

"I have never had a horse."

"The girls won't have you because you're an ignoramus. Give me the new reins."

Byron, the shaft horse, standing harnessed in the wide-open doors, champed its bit, pawed the board floor and playfully took Sergei Ivanovich's shoulder between his teeth as the latter arranged the horse's forelock under the browband. The carriage house smelled of leather, healthy horse sweat and pigeons. When the horses were harnessed Sergei Ivanovich turned to Nikita with a faint smile.

"D'you want to saddle up yourself?"

Klopik was brought from the stables. Nikita looked at him in excitement.

Klopik was roan, a well-groomed, short, sturdy gelding with white stockings, a thick, dark tail and mane. He had a big forelock that covered his eyes and he tossed his head looking merrily from under the hair. There was a long black line down his back.

"A fine horse," said Sergei Ivanovich as he fetched a pail of water. Klopik drank and then lifted his head with the water trickling down from his grey lips.

Nikita took the headstall and, as he had been taught, put the bit in the horse's mouth from one side and fastened the throatlash. Klopik took the steel between his teeth. Nikita put the saddle blanket in place, covered it with a grey horsecloth with initials in the corner, threw the saddle over the horse's back and began tightening the girth—it was no easy task for him.

"He blows out his belly," said Sergei Ivanovich. "The cunning beast blows out his belly," and he slapped Klopik's belly with his hand: the gelding blew the air out of his mouth and Nikita pulled the girth up tight.

*

Vasily Nikitievich came up and began to give instructions.

"Take the reins in the left hand, approach the horse from the front, from the near shoulder. Mount. Take up the slack till he feels the bit. Don't dangle your feet in the stirrups. don't turn your toes down."

Nikita mounted, found the elusive off stirrup with a trembling leg, touched the horse with his heels and away went Klopik at a trot towards the stables.

Vasily Nikitievich shouted:

"Halt! Stop! Use your off rein, clumsy."

Klopik stopped in the shade of the stables. Nikita was hot from shame, dismounted, took the horse by the bridle and led him out, whispering all the time to the sly gelding:

"Swine, you're a real swine, you poor idiot! . . ."

Klopik jauntily tossed his forelock. Sergei Ivanovich came up to them.

"Mount and I'll lead him off. He's a cunning young beast. He doesn't want to work, wants to stand in the shade."

At last Klopik was under control and Nikita cantered him along past the cattle sheds.

Sergei Ivanovich donned his feathered hat, his white, floured gloves, mounted the box and shouted sternly:

"Let 'em go!"

Arlyom, who was holding Byron by the bridle, jumped away and the carriage, rattling over the boards, flew out of the coach house flashing copper and varnish, fresh turves flying from under the heels of the trace horses, the matched harness bells tinkling; the carriage described a half-circle round the yard and halted outside the house.

Alexandra Leontievna, wearing a white dress, came down from the porch, opened a white parasol; she looked in alarm at Nikita who was prancing away in the distance. Father seated Mamma in the carriage and then climbed in himself.

"Drive away!"

Sergei Ivanovich lifted the reins. The splendid dark bays, fretting at their tight bits, pulled the carriage away easily, their hoofs rattled over the boardwalk and the trace horses fell into a gallop; the team got into its stride. Byron realized that this was all a joke and flattened his ears. Mamma kept glancing round. Nikita had slackened his reins, was bending low over the horse's neck and racing hell for leather after the carriage.

He wanted to race madly past but Klopik had a different idea—he thought it was all a waste of time and when he drew level with the carriage he turned on to the road, dropped into a trot just behind the wheels in a cloud of dust. Nothing could check him or turn him off the road: he thought it was all unnecessary, if one had to ride one should ride on the road and all argument was useless.

Mamma looked round. Nikita was shaking, his lips were pressed together and he was looking intently between the horse's ears. The dust made him feel sick and the horse's trot upset his stomach.

"D'you want to get into the carriage?"

Nikita stubbornly shook his head. Father, smiling, turned to Sergei Ivanovich.

"Let them go all out!"

Byron pricked up his ears, his iron legs began to work with a will and the trace horses spread out on to the grass verge. Klopik broke into a gallop but the carriage gradually drew away from him and he grew angry and galloped with all his might, making a great effort.

The sickening sensation of the jog trot passed away and Nikita sat easily and firmly in his saddle, the wind whistling in his ears; at the side of the road there were waves of green corn and the sweet voices of the larks, unseen in the sunlight, rang out. . . . It was almost as good as in Fenimore Cooper.

The carriage horses slowed down to a walk. Nikita

overtook the carriage and, panting, looked happily at his father.

"All right, Nikita?"

"Marvelous. . . Klopik's a wonderful horse. . ."

IN THE SWIMMING POOL

Early one morning Vasily Nikitievich, Arkady Ivanovich and Nikita walked in single file along a path through grass that was grey with the dew; they were going to the pond to bathe.

The early morning mist still filled the thickets in the garden. Butterflies hovered like tiny leaves over the nectar-bearing yellow cowslips and the white clover in the glade where a worried bee was buzzing around. A wild dove cooed in the thicket—he closed his eyes, puffed out his chest and cooed, sweetly and sadly, that it would always be like this, it would pass but it would begin all over again.

Vasily Nikitievich crossed the footbridge whose long boards slapped on the water and entered the dressing room where he undressed on a bench that stood in the shadow; he slapped his white hairy chest, his smooth sides, squinted at the blinding reflection in the water and said: •

"Fine, excellent!"

His sunburned face and flashing beard seemed to have been as an afterthought to his white body. Father had a particularly fine fragrance of health about him. Whenever a fly alighted on his leg or his shoulder he would slap it loudly with his open hand leaving a pink mark on his skin. When he had cooled off, Father took a piece of toilet soap, a very light kind that did not sink in the water and walked carefully down the slippery, moss covered steps into the bathing pool—the water came up to his chest—and began vigorously soaping his head and beard snorting and muttering:

"Fine, excellent."

Over the top of the bathing pool there was a swarm of midges on the bluish sunlight. A dragonfly floated past, looked in alarm with its bulging green eyes at Vasily Nikitievich's lathered head and flew off sideways. Arkady Ivanovich, in the meantime, was hurriedly and bashfully undressing; he curled up his long toes, opened the outer door of the dressing room and looked out to make sure that nobody could see him from the bank and said in a deep bass—"Ugh, fine," and plunged flat on his belly in the pond. The water splashed up in all directions, the scared rooks flew up from the willows, and he swam with big, long strokes, his body with its reddish hair wriggling under the blue water.

When he reached the middle of the pond Arkady Ivanovich began turning somersaults, he dived and reappeared, grunting like a water monster: "Ugh, br-r-r-r."

Nikita sat curled up on the resinous bench and waited until his father finished washing. Vasily Nikitievich placed the soap on the steps, stuck his fingers in his ears and ducked three times—his wet hair stuck to his head, his beard hung down like a goat's and in general he had the appearance of an unfortunate being: in fact, they had a name for this—it was called "playing at Unfortunate Vasya."

"Now let's have a swim," he said, and went out of the door and plunged heavily into the water. He swam like a frog, slowly moving his arms and legs in the clear water.

Nikita plunged head first into the water and, overtaking his father, swam beside him, waiting for praise from him; that summer Nikita had learned to swim well by accompanying the boys who bathed in the Chagry River—he could swim on his side and his back, could tread water and turn a somersault under water.

"Let's duck Arkady," said Father in a whisper.

They parted and swam from two directions towards Arkady Ivanovich who was so shortsighted that he could not see anything even near him. With long strokes they swam up close and

jumped on him. Arkady Ivanovich got mad at them, began darting this way and that, lifted himself out of the water up to his waist and then dived under: they tried to catch him by the feet for he hated being tickled more than anything else. It was not very easy to catch him, however, he nearly always escaped and when Vasily Nikitievich and Nikita returned to the dressing room he was already sitting on the bench in his underclothes and glasses.

"You must learn to swim, gentlemen," he said with a chuckle of annoyance.

When they returned from these excursions they usually met Alexandra Leontievna in a white mobcap and a fluffy dressing gown.

"Breakfast is laid under the lime trees in the garden," said Mamma, screwing up her eyes in the sunlight and smiling. "You start, don't wait for me, the rolls will get cold."

THE BAROMETER NEEDLE

For several days Vasily Nikitievich has been tapping the barometer with his thumbnail and cursing in a whisper: the needle showed "Dry. Very Dry." For a fortnight not a drop of rain had fallen and it was time for the grain to ripen. The earth was cracking, the sky looked washed-out in the heat and in the distance, on the horizon there was a dark haze that looked like the dust raised by a herd of cattle. The meadows burned up, the leaves on the trees drooped and began to curl and no matter how often Vasily Nikitievich tapped the barometer the needle still indicated "Dry. Very Dry."

When they met at table the family did not joke as was their wont: Father and Mother went about with a worried look on their faces: Arkady Ivanovich was also silent, he stared at his plate and from time to time adjusted his glasses, trying to cover up a surreptitious sigh by these subterfuges. He, how-

ever, had his own reasons: Vassa Nilovna, the city schoolmistress, who had promised to come to Sosnovka on a visit, had written that she was "chained to the bed of her sick mother" and did not expect to see Arkady Ivanovich before autumn in Samara.

That is just how Nikita imagined that Vassa Nilovna: a tall, downcast woman in a grey blouse with a watch on a silk cord and one leg fastened to the bed by a chain. In those days that were stifling and gloomy from the heat haze, the city schoolmistress sitting beside an iron bed against a bare wall presented a particularly dismal picture.

At lunch Vasily Nikitievich sat rhythmically tapping the edge of his plate.

"If it doesn't rain tomorrow there'll be no harvest," he said.

Mamma immediately lowered her head. They could hear a fly buzzing madly in the big window, in the top part where there were double panes of bulging glass that were never cleaned and had cobwebs in between them. The French windows leading to the semispherical balcony were closed to keep out the heat from the garden.

"Surely there won't be another famine year," said Mamma, "Oh, my God, how awful!"

"That's how things stand: sit still and await the sentence." Father walked over to the window and glanced up at the sky, his hands thrust into the pockets of his tussore silk trousers. "Another day of this hellish heat and we'll have a hungry winter typhus, cattle dying off, children dying... It's beyond all reason."

They finished lunch in silence. Father went to bed. Mother had to go to the kitchen to check the linen. Arkady Ivanovich, in order to put himself into an even worse mood, went out for a walk in the burning steppe.

In the evil silence that filled the rooms in the afternoon nothing could be heard but the buzzing of the flies; every-

thing seemed damped by a layer of dust. Nikita did not know what to do with himself. He went on to the porch. In the hazy but blinding white light of the sun the yard was empty and silent—everything was asleep, dead. His head rang from the silence and the heat.

Nikita went into the garden but there was no life there, either. A sleepy bee buzzed. The dusty leaves hung motionless as though made of tin. The boat lay still deep in the depressing pond, rooks had covered its sides with white spots.

Nikita went back home and lay down on a little sofa that smelled of mice. In the middle of the room stood a clothless dining table with a large number of disgusting thin legs. There was nothing in the world more boring than that table. Far away in the kitchen the cook was singing softly—she was most probably cleaning the knives with brickdust and was howling, howling in a low voice from deadly boredom.

And suddenly on the sill of a half-open window Zheltukhin appeared, his bill half open because of the heat. When he regained his breath he flew across the room and alighted on Nikita's shoulder. Turning his head he looked Nikita in the eyes, then pecked at his temple where the boy had a black birthmark that looked like a grain of wheat, felt it and then looked into his eyes again.

"Leave me alone, please, and go away," Nikita said to him; he got up lazily, filled the starling's saucer with water.

Zheltukhin drank his fill, jumped into the saucer, washed himself, splashed all the water out of the saucer, and then began to look round cheerfully for a place where he could shake and preen himself; he alighted on the ledge of the wooden barometer.

"Fuweet," said Zheltukhin in a tender voice. "Fuweet, sto-r-r-m."

"What d'you say?" asked Nikita going over to the barometer.

Zheltukhin bowed as he sat there on the ledge, lowered his wings and muttered something in bird language and something else in Russian. And then Nikita noticed that the blue needle on the barometer had moved far away from the golden needle and was hesitating between "variable" and "storm."

Nikita drummed on the glass with his fingers and the needle moved farther towards the "storm" division. Nikita ran to the library where his father was sleeping. He knocked at the door and a dull, sleepy voice called out:

"Who is it? What's the matter?"

"Papa, come and look at the barometer. . . ."

"Don't bother me, Nikita, I'm sleeping."

"But come and look what's happening to the barometer, Papa. . . ."

It was very quiet in the library and apparently father was unable to wake up. At last his bare feet shuffled across the floor, the key turned in the lock and a tousled beard looked out of the crack of the door.

"Why did you wake me up? What's the matter?"

"The barometer is pointing to 'storm.'"

"I don't believe you," said Father in a scared whisper and ran into the drawing room; he immediately shouted for the whole house to hear. "Sasha, Sasha, a storm! Hurrah! We're saved!"

The oppression and the heat grew worse. The birds grew silent, the dazed flies swarmed on the windows. Towards evening the low sun disappeared into the burning haze. Twilight came on very fast. It was pitch dark, not a single star shining. The barometer was set firm at "storm." The whole family had gathered round the centipede table. They spoke in whispers, glancing towards the open balcony doors that led into the invisible garden.

In the deadly silence the first motion came from the willows on the pond whose rustling was accompanied by the

cries of the alarmed rooks. Father went out on to the dark balcony. The noises grew louder and more triumphant, until at last a strong gust of wind flattened the acacia by the balcony carrying the smells in the fields and several dead leaves into the house; the flame of the opaque lamp shade flickered and the wind, growing in fury, howled and shrieked in the chimneys and round the corners of the house. Somewhere a window slammed and there was a sound of breaking glass, the tree trunks groaned as their invisible crowns swayed in the wind. Vasily Nikitievich, his hair disheveled, returned from the balcony, his mouth was open and his eyes seemed bigger. A blinding whitish-blue flash broke the darkness of the night and the low, wind-bent trees appeared for an instant as black silhouettes. Then darkness again. With a roar the whole heavens descended. On account of the noise they did not hear the raindrops strike and run down the window panes. The rain was strong, abundant, it poured down in torrents. Mamma stood at the balcony doors, her eyes filled with tears. The smell of dampness, of rot, rain and grass filled the room.

THE NOTE

Nikita slipped out of his saddle, tied Klopik up to a nail in the black and white post outside, the post office in the market place of the village of Utyovka.

Behind the open barrier sat the tousle-headed, puffy-faced postmaster melting sealing wax over a candle. The table at which he sat was covered with sealing wax and inkstains and sprinkled with tobacco ash. When he had accumulated sufficient wax on the envelope he seized the stamp in his hairy hands and brought it down on the wax with as much force as if he wanted to crush the skull of the sender. Then he fumbled in the table drawer, pulled out a stamp, stuck out his huge tongue licked

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the stamp, stuck it on the envelope, spat disgustedly and only then turned his bloodshot eyes on Nikita.

The postmaster's name was Ivan Ivanovich Landyshev. He was in the habit of reading all the newspapers and magazines and until he had read them from cover to cover would not even think of delivering them. Complaints had been lodged against him in Samara but he did not give up his reading, only grew more bad-tempered. He got drunk six times a year and then people were afraid even to enter the post office. On such days the postmaster would stick his head out of the window and shout across the whole market place: "You've eaten away my soul, curse you."

"Papa sent me for the mail," said Nikita.

The postmaster did not answer him, again began to melt sealing wax, dropped a spot on his hand, jumped up, howled and sat down again.

"How am I supposed to know who your papa is?" he muttered in a grumpy voice. "Everybody here is a papa, they're all papas. . . ."

"What did you say?"

"That you have a thousand fathers, I say," the postmaster even spat under the table. "Your name, your name, tell me, what's that papa's name?" He threw down the sealing wax and when Nikita answered him, pulled a bundle of letters out of the drawer.

Nikita put the letters in his bag and asked timidly:

"And aren't there any magazines or papers?"

The postmaster began to blow out his cheeks. Nikita did not wait for an answer but ran out of the door.

At the hitching post Klopik was stamping his feet and swishing himself with his tail to get rid of the flies that swarmed on him. Two little boys with flaxen hair, their faces daubed with some red substance, were looking at the horse.

"Mind out of the way," shouted Nikita as he climbed into the saddle.

One of the boys sat down in the dust, the other turned round and ran away. In the window he could see that the post-master had again taken up his sealing wax.

When Nikita left the village and rode out into the open steppe, hot and golden yellow from the ripening corn, he allowed Klopik to go his own pace, opened his bag and looked through the letters.

There was one little letter in a lavender-coloured envelope on which was an inscription in big letters "For Nikita." The note was written on lace paper. Blinking his eyes in his excitement, Nikita read:

"Dear Nikita,

"I haven't forgotten you. I love you very much. We are living at the summer cottage. It is a lovely little cottage. Although Victor does bother me a lot; he won't leave me alone. He has got quite out of hand. He has had his hair cropped off with the machine for the third time and goes about all covered in scratches. I play in the garden alone. We have a swing and even apples, but they aren't ripe yet. Do you remember the magic forest? Come and see us in Samara in the autumn. I haven't lost your ring yet. Good-bye.

Lilya "

Nikita read that wonderful letter several times over. Suddenly the memory of the glorious days of the Christmas holidays came back to him. The candles were burning. Shadows danced on the walls, the big bow appeared over the penetrating blue eyes of a girl, the paper chains rustled and the moonlight sparkled on the frost-bound windows. The snow-covered roofs, white trees and the fields of snow were flooded with a transparent light.... Lilya again sat at the round table under the lamp, her head rested on her fist... Magic!...

Nikita stood up in his stirrups and cracked his whip—his action was so sudden that Klopik jumped to one side and

broke into a canter. The wind whistled in his ears. An eagle soared high over the steppes, over the ripe grain that in some places had already been cut and over the clayey bank of the river. The peewits screamed plaintively and forlornly around a brackish pool in a hollow. "Run, run, run," thought Nikita. His heart was happy and beating fast. "Blow, blow, wind! . . . Fly, fly, eagle! . . . Scream, scream, you peewits. I am happier than you. The wind and I, the wind and I . . ."

THE FAIR AT PESTRAVKA

Vasily Nikitievich and Mamma had been quarreling for three days: Father wanted to go to the fair at Pestravka but Mamma was very much opposed to the trip.

"In Pestravka, my friend, they'll manage very well without you."

"Strange," answered Father, taking up a handful of his beard, gnawing it and shrugging his shoulders. "that's very strange."

"Think it strange if you like, my friend."

"But it is peculiar, more than peculiar, in fact."

"I tell you again," repeated Mamma, "we don't need any new horses: the stable is full of riding horses, God knows!"

"Will you at last understand that I am going to sell Zaremka, that accursed mare."

"You shouldn't, Zaremka's a good horse."

"You think so!" Father spread his legs and his eyes bulged. "Zaremka bites and bucks."

"No," answered Mamma firmly. "Zaremka does not bite or buck."

"In that case," Father even bowed politely, "here is my ultimatum: either I leave the place or that accursed mare does."

In the end, Mamma, as Nikita had expected, gave way to Father. The quarrel ended in a truce with concessions: they

decided to sell the mare and Father promised "not to spend crazy sums of money at the fair."

In order to make good any expenses, Vasily Nikitievich decided to send two cartloads of apples, windfalls, to Pestravka and to sell them retail.

Nikita asked and obtained permission to go with Mishka Koryashonok on the carts.

From the very morning there were hitches. The horses were not ready and Mishka Koryashonok flew away on the trace horse to the herd that was scarcely visible in the morning haze on the low-lying lands beyond the ponds. Then when Zaremka, a roan mare with white stockings, was brought from the stables and the grooms began to curry her she caught hold of Sergei Ivanovich with her teeth and almost bit into him. Father saw it all from the window and ran to the stables in his night clothes.

"So she does bite! I told you so, you accursed devils."

Zaremka began pulling back, sitting on her haunches, dragged Sergei Ivanovich around as he held on to her head-stall, whinnied, broke away and lowering her head and bucking so that the clumps of earth from her hind flew over the carriage house, she galloped away to the herd. Then it was discovered that Artyom, who was to go with the carts, had disappeared. A search was made and it was discovered that he was in the lock-up for arrears on taxes—Artyom was about five years in arrears and an order had been given that wherever he was to be found he was to be arrested and put in the lock-up until somebody bailed him out.

Vasily Nikitievich sent a mounted messenger to the village elder and Artyom was let out on bail; he came to harness the carts in a merry mood. The carts were ready at last and Zaremka was tied to the rear cart. Nikita and Mishka Koryashonok climbed on to the front cart. Artyom slapped the horse with his reins and the carts moved off. . . . Sergei Ivanovich tried to play a joke on him; pointing to the wheel he

shouted: "Look, the lynchpin." Artyom got down again, looked at the wheel, but the lynchpin was quite all right. He scratched his head, shook it. . . . At last they got off.

It was a fine journey. There was a slight breeze blowing that smelled of wormwood and wheat straw and tossed the leaves of the burdocks between the fields. From the haystacks that stood all over the level steppes wherever you looked, a hawk arose and soared slowly across the sky. In the distance arose a blue smoke where food was being cooked in the ploughmen's camp.

They arrived at the camp and found a caravan there. Artyom pulled up the horses and the boys went to a barrel to drink pond water that smelled of the barrel and was full of infusoria. The aged man who cooked for the ploughmen laid his hand on the side of the cart and, shaking his bare head, said:

"Taking apples to sell?" Nikita offered him an apple. "No thanks, lad, I've nothing to bite them with."

As they left the camp they met four herdsmen; tousle-headed ploughmen in sweat-hardened shirts were walking behind oxen dragging ploughs, shares up, and stumbling in the potholes. They were on their way back to camp for dinner. Artyom again stopped and spent a long time asking which way to turn off the road to get to Pestravka.

By midday the breeze died down and waves of heat arose in the distance, at the very edge of the steppes. Peering into that trembling blue haze Nikita saw now a floating house, now a tree hanging over the earth, now a ship without its mast. The carts drove on. Grasshoppers chirped. Then there came the regular musical sound of bells across the steppe. Zaremka danced and sidestepped and then neighed loudly. Artyom turned round and said with a wink:

"That's the boss coming!"

Soon a team of three horses dashed past the carts—Byron, his head thrown back, was moving along at a swinging trot

with the high-rumped trace horses snapping at the ground in anger. Father sat in the carriage with his arms akimbo—he was wearing a tussore jacket and his beard was blown out on either side by the wind; glancing round with merry eyes he shouted to Nikita:

“D’you want to come with me?” And the carriage rolled past.

At last the two domes of the white church, the poles over the wells, the tops of occasional willows, wisps of smoke and roofs gradually appeared; beyond the clayey-yellow river, sparkling in the sun, the whole village of Pestravka came into view and in the fields on the far side of the village there were the marquees of the fair and herds of animals making black patches.

The carts went over a rickety bridge just above the level of the water at a trot, passed the church square where a fat priest was playing the fiddle in the corner window of a pink house, turned into the field where the fair booths stood and came to a halt near the place where the potters had their stand.

Nikita stood up in the cart and looked: a Gypsy in a blue caftan with silver buttons that was open on his bare chest and with a black beard that came right up to his eyes was examining the teeth of a sick horse, while a feeble little peasant, the horse’s owner, looked at the Gypsy in astonishment. Then there was a cunning old man trying to persuade a scared woman to buy a pot decorated with a grass-leaf design which he was tapping with his fingernail. “But I don’t want that sort of pot at all, father,” said the woman. “You may search the whole world and not find a pot like that, dearie.” A drunken peasant was shouting angrily beside a basket full of eggs: “D’you call those eggs? D’you think they’re eggs—they’re feeble! In our village of Koldyban we have eggs that are eggs, in Koldyban. I say, the chickens are up to their necks in grain.” Girls in pink and yellow blouses and brightly coloured kerchiefs turned

towards the marquees where shouting salesmen leaned over their counters and seized passers-by: "Come to us, come to us, everybody buys from us..." Dust, shouts and the neighing of horses filled the fair. Earthenware whistles squeaked. The shafts of caris stuck up everywhere. Staggering along, a young man in a blue shirt torn on the shoulder, was tugging at an accordion with all his might: "Hi, Dunya, Dunya, Dunya..."

Artyom unharnessed the horses and unshipped the shafts. Just then a man in a military tunic, wearing a sword on a shoulder strap, came up to Artyom. The man looked at him and shook his head, Artyom also looked at him and removed his cap.

"I've had you before, you tramp," said a mustachioed man, "this time I'll finish you for sure."

"As you will," answered Artyom.

The mustachioed man took him under the elbow and marched him away. The sly old man who was selling pots looked after them and smiled. Mishka Koryashonok whispered to Nikita in worried tones:

"Run and find your father and tell him a policeman has taken Artyom away to the lock-up. I'll look after the carts."

Nikita made his way out of the crowd and ran across the trampled field of feather grass towards the horse field where he could see his father's carriage in the distance. Father, in a very merry mood, was standing at one of the pens with his hands in his jacket pockets. Nikita began telling him about what had happened to Artyom but Vasily Nikitievich immediately interrupted him.

"Look at that young grey stallion ... What a stallion ... Wonderful..."

Three Bashkirians in faded quilted robes and caps with earflaps were running about amongst the horses in the corral trying to catch a lively roan stallion with their lariats. The

stallion lay back its ears and showed its teeth and shied; it twisted away from the lariats and ran first into the middle of the drove of horses and then out into the open again. Suddenly the horse dropped onto its knees and crawled under the rails of the corral, lifted the rail with its neck, got out and raced away jauntily towards the open grassy steppe, its mane and tail blowing in the wind. Father stamped his feet in delight.

The Bashkirians, wobbling along on their bandy legs, ran for their saddle horses, short, shaggy little beasts, leaped lightly into their high saddles, two chasing the fugitive and the third, with a lariat, to cut him off. The stallion began twisting and turning in the open field but each time he found himself faced by one of the Bashkirians, howling like an animal. The stallion hesitated and a lariat was immediately thrown over his neck. He tried to twist out of it but the Bashkirian slashed his side with whips and almost strangled him with the lariat. He staggered and fell. The stallion was brought back to the pen in a lather and trembling. A wrinkled old Bashkirian tumbled out of his saddle like a sack of oats and walked over to Vasily Nikitievich.

"Buy the stallion, sir."

Father laughed and walked over to another corral. Nikita again began telling him about Artyom.

"What a pity," exclaimed Father, "whatever can I do with that idiot? Here take these twenty kopeks, buy a roll and some fish and wait for me on the carts. . . . I've sold Zaremka to Medvedyev, I sold her cheaply but without any trouble. Run along, I'll come soon."

"Soon," however, turned out to be a long time. The big pale-orange sun was hanging over the very edge of the steppe and a haze of golden dust hung over the fairground. The church bells were ringing for vespers. Only then did Father put in an appearance. He wore a confused look on his face.

"Quite by accident I have bought a party of camels," he said without looking Nikita in the eyes, "extremely cheap. . . .

Haven't they sent for the mare yet? Funny. And have you sold many of the apples? Only sixty-five kopeks worth? Funny. So that's that: well, to hell with the apples—I told Medvedyev that I'd give him the apples together with the mare. . . . Let's go and rescue Artyom."

Vasily Nikitievich took Nikita round the shoulder and led him through the already quietening fairground, between carts that smelled of hay, tar and grain. Here and there they heard songs sung in high-pitched voices that floated away and disappeared in the steppes. A horse neighed.

"Do you know," Father stopped and his eyes flashed slyly, "I'll be in for it when we get home. . . . Well, it doesn't matter. Tomorrow we'll have a look at a trio of horses, all dapple-greys. . . . May as well be hanged for a sheep as lamb. . . ."

ON THE CART

That evening Nikita came back from the threshing on a wagon filled with sweet-smelling wheat straw. The narrow strip of sunset, sad and crimson as it always is in autumn, was dying out over the steppe, over the ancient burial mounds, monuments left by nomad tribes that had passed this way in past ages.

In the twilight the furrows could be seen on the empty harvested fields. Here and there the fire of a ploughman's camp glowed in the darkness and acrid smoke wafted away from them. The cart squeaked and rocked. Nikita lay on his back with his eyes closed. The whole of his body was pleasantly tired. As he dozed off he remembered what had happened during the day.

. . . Four pairs of strong mares had walked round and round at the end of the thresher shaft. In the middle, on the tiny seat on the beam sat Mishka Koryashonok, shouting and cracking his whip.

An endless belt ran from the wheel on top of the upright

that turned with the beam to the red threshing machine, as big as a house, whose screens and straw bundlers shook madly. The thresher drum rose and fell with a howl and a ferocious whine that could be heard all over the steppes—it consumed the sheaves as they were thrown in, driving the straw and the grain into the dusty belly of the machine. Vasily Nikitievich himself had been feeding the machine—he wore close-fitting goggles and leather gauntlets that reached to his elbows, his shirt stuck to his back with perspiration, he was all dusty, his beard was covered in chaff and his mouth was black. The creaky carts came rolling up with more sheaves. A lad ran straddle-legged after the conveyor that brought the straw out of the machine, seized huge armfuls, ran up the plank at a trot and hurled the straw on to the rick. Elderly peasants arranged the straw on the ricks with long wooden pitchforks. The cares, toil and alarms of a whole year were over. The whole day long there had been songs and jokes. Artyom was unloading the sheaves from the carts ready for the thresher and the girls had caught hold of him there between the carts and tickled him—a thing he hated—had rolled him over and stuffed his clothes with chaff. That had been great fun! . . .

. . . Nikita opened his eyes. The wagon swayed and creaked. It was by now quite dark in the steppes. The whole sky was covered with the August constellations. The bottomless abyss of the sky was pulsating as though a breeze had passed over the starry dust. The glittering nebula of the Milky Way spread in the dark sky. To Nikita the wagon was like a cradle in which he floated under the stars gazing calmly at distant worlds.

"It's all mine," he thought, "some day I will get on board an airship and fly away. . . ." And he began to imagine an airship with wings like those of a bat, the black emptiness of the sky and the blue shores of an approaching planet—silver mountains, magic lakes, the silhouettes of castles with figures and clouds floating over the water as they do at sunset.

The cart began to descend the hill. Dogs barked in the distance. A breath of dampness came from the ponds. They entered the yard. A cosy warm light poured out of the windows of the house, out of the dining room.

DEPARTURE

Autumn came and the earth prepared to rest. The sun rose late, there was no warmth in it, an old sun who no longer had any time left for the earth. The birds flew away. The garden emptied, the leaves fell to the ground. The boat was taken out of the pond and put away in a shed bottom up.

In the mornings the grass was grey with hoarfrost in the places that lay in the shadow of the roof. Across the frost-covered, autumn-green grass the geese made their way to the pond—the geese were fat, they wobbled along looking like snowballs. Twelve village girls were chopping cabbage in a big trough outside the workers' quarters—the sound of their songs and their choppers filled the whole yard. Gnawing a cabbage stalk, Dunyasha ran out from the cellar where they were making butter—she had grown prettier over the autumn and her cheeks were so red that everybody knew she wasn't running to the workers' quarters to gnaw cabbage stumps or joke with the girls but so that the young worker Vasily could see her from the window—he was like her, bursting with health and vigour. Artyom was terribly depressed—he was sitting inside mending horse collars.

Mamma had already moved into the winter part of the house. The stoves had been heated. Akhilka the hedgehog had been dragging rags and paper under the sideboard and fussing around making himself a nest for his winter sleep. Arkady Ivanovich was whistling to himself in his room. Nikita saw him through the keyhole—Arkady Ivanovich was standing in front of the mirror, holding the end of his beard in his hand and

whistling thoughtfully: obviously the man was preparing to get married.

Vasily Nikitievich had sent the carts to Samara with grain and had gone there himself the next day. Before he left there had been a long talk with Mamma. She was awaiting a letter from him.

A week later Vasily Nikitievich wrote:

"I have sold the grain and, just imagine, at a good price. better than Medvedyev. The case of the inheritance hasn't budged an inch, as was to be expected. The second alternative, which you objected to so strongly, Sasha dear, is absolutely essential. We must not live apart for another winter. I advise you to leave as soon as possible as the Gymnasium has already begun. It is only by way of exception that Nikita will be allowed to take the entrance examination for the second form. Incidentally, I have been offered two beautiful Chinese vases - they'll do for our town apartment: it was only fear of angering you that led me to put off the purchase for the time being..."

Mamma did not hesitate very long. Fear of leaving Vasily Nikitievich with a large sum of money on his hands, and more especially the fear that he would purchase Chinese vases that nobody had any earthly use for, compelled Alexandra Leontievna to get ready in three days. The furniture that would be needed in town, the big trunks, barrels of salted stuff and the poultry she loaded on to carts and sent off. She went on ahead in two three-horse carriages with Nikita, Arkady Ivanovich and Vasilisa the cook. It was a dull and windy day. On both sides of the road lay empty harvested and ploughed fields. Mamma took pity on the horses and drove at a jog trot. They spent a night at the inn in Koldyban. By lunch time the next day the domes of churches and chimneys of the steam flour mills appeared over the rim of the flat steppe. Mamma was silent: she did not like towns or town life. Arkady Ivanovich was biting his beard in his impatience. For a long time they

drove past stinking soap works, past timber yards, drove through a dirty suburb with taverns and grocers' shops and over a wide bridge where young bandits from the suburbs waylaid people at night; then came the gloomy log-built granaries on the steep bank of the Samarka River—the tired horses pulled up the hill and the wheels rattled on a paved road. The cleanly dressed passers-by looked with surprise at the muddy carriages. Nikita began to think that both the carriages were ungainly and funny, that the horses were ill-bred peasants' animals—if they would only leave the main street! A black trotter harnessed to a lacquered gig flew past them.

"Sergei Ivanovich, what are you driving so slowly for, drive faster," said Nikita.

"We'll get there like this, too."

Sergei Ivanovich sat sedately and sternly on his box holding his three horses to a trot. At last they turned into a side street, drove past the fire station where a chubby lad in a Grecian helmet was standing at the gate, and came to a standstill outside a one-storey white house with a cast-iron porch that stretched right across the sidewalk. Vasily Ivanovich's joyful face appeared at a window. He waved his hand, disappeared and a minute later opened the front door himself.

Nikita was the first to run into the house. It was very light in the small empty drawing room with its white wallpaper, near the wall on the shining varnished floor stood two Chinese vases that looked like water jugs. At the end of the drawing room, in an arch with white columns that were reflected in the floor, a girl in a brown dress appeared. Her hands were folded under a white pinafore and her brown boots were also reflected in the polished floor. Her hair was done in a plait and behind her ears, on the back of her head, was a black bow. Her blue eyes had a severe look in them, she was almost frowning. It was Lilya. Nikita stood in the middle of the room, rooted to the floor. No doubt Lilya was looking at him in the same way

as the people in the main street had looked at the pinewood carriages.

"Did you get my letter?" she asked. Nikita nodded. "Where is it? Give it to me this minute."

Although he had not got the letter with him Nikita began fumbling in his pockets. Lilya looked him straight in the eyes, attentively and angrily....

"I wanted to answer, but..." muttered Nikita.

"Where is it?"

"In my portmanteau."

"If you don't give it to me today everything is over between us.... I was very sorry that I wrote to you.... Now I have entered the first form at the Gymnasium."

She pressed her lips together and stood on tiptoe. It was only now that Nikita realized that he should have answered Lilya's letter.... He swallowed hard, dragged his feet from the polished floor.... Lilya immediately hid her hands under her pinafore again—the tip of her nose rose into the air. She showed her contempt by completely veiling her eyes with her long lashes.

"Forgive me," said Nikita. "I'm awful, awful.... It's been all horses, harvesting, threshing, Mishka Koryashonok...."

He turned red and lowered his head. Lilya did not answer. He felt the same disgust for himself as he felt for cow dung. Just then, however, Anna Apollosovna's voice boomed through the entrance hall, there was an exchange of greetings and the heavy steps of the coachmen carrying in the luggage could be heard. Lilya whispered angrily and quickly:

"They can see us.... You're impossible.... Put on a cheerful look ... perhaps I'll forgive you this time...."

She ran out into the hall. From there her thin voice rang through the empty hollow rooms:

"Good afternoon, Auntie Sasha, welcome to Samara!"

That's how the first day of the new life began. Instead of

the calm, pleasant village ease and freedom there were seven small cheerless rooms and outside the windows heavy carts rattling over the cobbles and people dressed like Verinosov the zemstvo doctor at Pestravka, running hurriedly along with a worried air, covering their mouths with their coat collars against the wind that blew paper and dust with it. Bustle, noise and disturbing conversations. Even the time passed differently, it flew. Nikita and Arkady Ivanovich fixed up Nikita's room—arranged the furniture and books and put up curtains. At dusk Victor came straight from the Gymnasium and told him that the fifth form boys smoked in the lavatories and that their arithmetic teacher had been glued to his chair with gum arabic. Victor was independent and distracted. He got Nikita to give him his penknife with the twelve blades and went to one of his classmates "you don't know him"—to play.

Nikita sat at the window in the twilight. The sunset over the town was the same as it had been in the village but Nikita, like Zheltukhin behind his gauze, felt that he was a prisoner, someone who didn't belong there. Just like Zheltukhin. Arkady Ivanovich came into the room wearing his hat and coat and the clean handkerchief in his hand spread the perfume of toilet water.

"I'm going out, I'll be back by about nine."

"Where are you going?"

"To the place where I am not at present." He guffawed. "Well, brother, and how did Lilya receive you? Bit sharp, wasn't she? Never mind, you'll get over it. Sometimes that's even a good thing, get rid of some of your rural fat..." He turned on his heel and went out. In a single day he had become a completely different man.

In a dream that night Nikita saw himself in a blue uniform with silver buttons standing in front of Lilya and saying sternly:

"Here is your letter, take it."

He almost woke up on these words but again saw himself walking across the mirrorlike surface of the floor and saying to Lilya:

"Here is your letter, take it."

Lilya's long eyelashes rose and fell, her independent nose was proud and alien and then suddenly the nose and the whole face ceased to wear that alien look and began to laugh. . . .

He awoke and looked round the room. The strange light of a street lamp lay on the wall. . . . Again Nikita had the same dream. In his waking hours he had never loved that inexplicable girl so much. . . .

Next morning Mamma, Nikita and Arkady Ivanovich went to the Gymnasium and talked with the headmaster, a thin, greyhaired, stern-looking man. A week later Nikita passed the examinations and took his place in the second form.

1920





A TALE OF THE TIME OF TROUBLES

FROM PRINCE TURENEV'S MANUSCRIPT

GREAT trouble came to me when I was in my sixties: my arms and legs began to swell and my face, which God made after his own image, grew ugly and 'twas not, as the women say, to be concealed behind bars. Thoughts of death overtook me. Fear became uppermost in my mind, my hair stood on end. At night I crawled down from my bed on the stove, fell on my face before the icons and swore an oath to labour in whatever field God should choose to put into my mind.

No sooner had the vernal waters subsided than I sent a messenger with gifts to my friend, the *Dyak** Shchelkalov, in Moscow: to him I sent twenty smoked geese, a keg of honey and a keg of sour pickled apples that he might in return send me the wherewithal to write—a book of a hundred pages of good paper and ink from the royal stores.

And now, in fulfilment of my oath, do I recall everything that my sinful eyes saw in the past stormy years. From that which I recall I have selected the story most calculated to give rise to wonder: inscrutable are the ways of man. And as I began to call things to mind—oh, my Lord God, I spat upon the floor, hid the book behind the image of the Holy Virgin: for people are evil, worse than the beasts of the forest. There is no end to the evil-doing of man. Ugh. . . .

* *Dyak*—a learned scribe who held a high official post under the tsars before Peter the Great.

The fit of despondency passed, however; I pondered well over my plan and decided to set forth on my humble task. And so I begin without haste to tell the tale of the extraordinary life of the Niphont. In our part of the world he is still remembered in these our days.

* * *

Niphont had borne the secular name of Naum. His father, Ivan Afanasyevich, was born in the village of Polivanov where he was a priest of the church and died many years since. Naum was taken into the house of his mother's brother, the deacon, Gremyachev: the deacon taught him to write and to read the psalters, made him a sexton and after a short time Naum was consecrated in the priesthood at the Church of St. Nicholas the Miraculous in the town of Kolomna. 'Twas there that I saw him for the first time.

We, the Princes Turenev, had our stronghold in Kolomna whither we fled from the village to withstand a siege whenever the Khan of Crimea appeared out of the Barbarian Steppes with his host behind him. 'Twixt the Donets and the Vorskla there were but two roads open to the Khan—either through Serpukhov or through Kolomna. Here, on the banks of the Oka River, stood the bastions and the border regiments were quartered in the towns. In those days the Oka bore the name of the Impassable Wall.

The old men said that Kolomna had been great under Tsar Ivan but as I remember the town 'twas already deserted: the Khan of Crimea's last raid across the Oka was by way of the Rapid Ford and after that nothing was heard of the Crimeans for about twenty years and the free men began to desert the town—some to hunt and trap, some to Moscow, while others became highwaymen in the steppes. In Kolomna there remained none but those who served the church and the monastery, with wardens in the strongholds, and in the traders' place amidst the open fields where the booths were locked and the gardens over-

grown with burdocks there lived half a hundred soldiers who guarded the approaches, and the coachmen at the state post-house.

'Twas dull enough in the deserted town. Blackbirds and doves circled round the rotting roofs and over the town stockade.

In those days there was a great famine throughout the land. For three years the earth had not borne fruit. The cattle had all been devoured. The arable lands were neither ploughed nor sown. The people wandered the forests and the roads—some went to Siberia, some to the north where fish were plentiful, others fled beyond the confines of the land, to Lithuania and to the Dnieper Marches. In Moscow Tsar Boris distributed bread and great multitudes of people made their way thither—in broad daylight wild beasts set upon those who fell from hunger by the wayside. . . .

The robbers outnumbered peaceful citizens. Our house in the village was burned down by a roaming band and mother and I, filled with a great fear, went to live in Kolomua within the safety of the walls.

I recall how I sat with mother enjoying the sunshine on the porch in our yard. Before us stood the wife of the priest, fat as a barrel, barefoot and dressed in a torn foxskin coat.

"The end of the world is at hand, Lady Princess," she said.

"I have just come across the bridge and there sat churchless priests, eight of them, all in rags, unkempt and cursing volubly while some had even taken to fisticuffs. I called shame upon them. And one of them, Naum, our parish priest, he said to me: 'Tsar Boris has sold his soul to the devil, is familiar with sorcerers and does not attend the church. We cannot remain under Boris and all of us, the priests, are going into the Barbarian Steppes, to the Cossack Ataman Voron-Nos. You will hear of us again.' "

Mamma was frightened and took me into the house. That evening Priest Naum came to our gates and pommelled them until we let him in.

about the evil people—mountebanks and minstrels—who wandered from village to village strumming, racing, jigging and playing pipes and when they came to a village they put up a tent of matting and set up within it the “Egyptian Gates” and enticed the people to go in and look—five people for a kopek. Who could help but go in and look! And as you look at the “Egyptian Gates” you are pulled, sucked in, your head whirls and you go flying through the gates into a bottomless pit, an abyss where there is no earth, sun or stars, nothing. In this way the evil men do away with a whole village.

The merchants from Moscow shouted treasonable words about Tsar Boris in the market place. On St. Peter’s Day our *voyevoda*,* Myasev, ordered one of the merchants to be seized and he was seized and whipped in the market place and half his tongue was cut out. The goods and chattels that he had in his wagon were given over for the people to plunder and he himself was driven out of the town.

The people, however, were not appeased. Then rumours began to spread over the countryside about Tsarevich Dimitry, that he had not been murdered in Uglich, but had been given protection by the Princes Cherkassky who had removed him to Lithuania and that now he had arrived at man’s estate and was gathering an army at Sambor to fight for the throne of his fathers and for the restoration of the Orthodox faith.

I remember that during Lent I went without the gates to listen to the bells of St. Nicholas the Miraculous that rang with beautiful sadness. I recall the day, too—’twas grey. Blackbirds came in hosts from beyond the river, rose into the heavens and descended in clouds on the dark cottages—the birds came in untold numbers. “Why are there so many birds over the town?” I wondered.

Just then a strange-looking wanderer passed our gates—he wore a drab coat in rags and tatters but he was well-fed and

* *Voyevoda*—the military governor of a town or province.

rosy-cheeked. He swung his arms as he walked straight towards the market place where the people thronged around the carts, trampling the dung underfoot. The man stopped, smiled and pointed to the birds.

"See how they scream, ravens, they are, ravens. . . . Not ordinary birds but ravens. . . . Christian people!" he tore off his headdress, a felt cap, "Christian people! Let those who believe in God read the proclamation of our true tsar! . . ."

He made his way towards the whipping post where thieves are punished in the market place and there nailed up the document—'twas as long as a linen towel with a seal below the writing and another seal hanging on a ribbon. The good folk abandoned their wagons and their booths and thronged noisily around the whipping post where the Sexton Konstantinov read that which was written.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. I did not perish at the treacherous hands of Godunov. the Angel of God stayed the hand of the slayer and another was murdered in my place. Now I have gathered troops in untold number. . . . After St. Peter's day I shall come out of Poland to the Russian lands to fight for the throne of my fathers. . . . 'Tis the duty of all Christians to fight for the true faith and not to defend Boris and let those who will flee to the Cossacks on the Don."

Thereupon all realized that the message came from the Tsarevich Dmitry. And there came shouts from the crowd: "We'll fight for him, we won't betray him!" and the people began throwing their caps into the air. The caps flew high and the ravens circled overhead—'twas awesome.

Just then Myasev the *voyevoda* rode into the market place. Lashing his stallion forward he tore the proclamation from the post and ordered the soldiers to disband the people. There was a great disturbance. The soldiers struck blows at the shouting people, tore their clothes to shreds but the people pressed around the *voyevoda's* horse: "Tell us the truth," they shouted.

"Who is the true tsar—Godunov or Dimitry? . . . We will lay down our lives for the true tsar."

Dyak Gryaznoy was pulled down by his leg and badly kicked for no reason at all and then dragged along through the dung—the folk wanted to drown him in the ice hole under the bridge. The *voyevoda* could not quieten the disturbance but went back to his own house and ordered the gates to be locked.

The riot in the market place lasted until sundown. At night the outlying group of houses caught fire and burned from both ends at once. The tocsin was sounded. 'Twas, indeed, afterwards said that the bells in the belfries rang of their own accord.

The whole town was awakened and the townspeople ran to the walls. The snow was as red as blood. The birds, ravens, swept in clouds over the conflagration, over the great fire. And the people saw in the heavens, high above the smoke and the swarms of birds a bareheaded woman: her hair stood on end and in her arms she held a dead infant.

That same night the soldiers broke down the gates of the *voyevoda's* house, ran hither and thither cursing profanely, seeking to kill the *voyevoda*; not finding him they broke open the storehouse, rolled out a barrel of wine which they drank themselves and gave to the peasants, of whom many had come to Kolomna from the surrounding villages during the night.

The whole riot was incited and led by the newly-arrived man who had brought the proclamation to the market place. The next day the people of Kolomna realized that the man was Naum, who was known to everybody, Naum the churchless priest. But he had already gone and had taken with him the unmarried soldiers, the drunken sexton Konstantin and many youngsters from the outlying settlement. They went on carts taking a culverin, a two-pounder cannon, gunpowder and all the things they had had time to steal.

More than another year passed. I cannot recall all the misfortunes that occurred. Tsar Boris died: he sat down to supper and his belly burst. filth trickled out of his mouth. *Voyevoda*

Basmanov with all his men went over to Tsarevich Dimitry. The tsarevich's secret envoys, Pleshcheyev and Pushkin, read a proclamation to the people on the Marsh Square in Moscow—they promised great indulgences. The people led the envoys to the Red Square where they read the proclamation for a second time and the Lord Prince Vasily Ivanovich Shuisky shouted from the rostrum that the infant killed in Uglich had been the priest's son. The people shouted: "Enough of the Godunovs!" Bells rang. The throng streamed into the Kremlin, killed the soldiers at the Ceremonial Balcony, entered the Royal Chambers, seized Tsar Fyodor and the Tsaritsa and dragged them across the balcony and through the passages to the old Godunov house. The tsar had been overthrown.

Throughout that night fires burned in the Kremlin and on Red Square. Traders' booths were looted on Varvarka. Ilyinka and Moroseika streets. Merchants crossing the pontoon bridge over the river were stabbed and their bodies cast into the water. Musket fire came from the houses, from behind the boyars' gates. Many an inn was looted and much wine was drunk. And the poorest of the poor skipped about 'twixt the fires, shaking their rags and baring their teeth in grins—and the people of Moscow crossed themselves, spat and were much astonished: oh, what evil happenings!

On the next day Princes Golitsyn and Masalsky with their followers came at the behest of the tsarevich and they killed Tsar Fyodor and the Tsaritsa-Mother and the people proclaimed Dimitry tsar.

At that time my mother and I were still living in Kolomna. People who came from Moscow said that there were troublous times in the town and that there was unrest amongst the people: great benefices had been promised but had not yet been seen. Tsar Dimitry kept away from his own people and consorted more with the Poles. He did not go to his bath-chamber every day, he ran when he went to church and did not give proper attention to the service. His legs were short and his right arm

was shorter than the left, his nose was long and had a wart on it, his hair stuck up and he had but recently allowed his beard to grow and it was a sickly thing. At the Festival of the Baptism he built a toy fortress on the ice of the Moskva River and filled it with soldiers. And a turret was built in the form of an animal's head and all fitted with fangs and painted in bright colours. When the turret was pushed from behind it rolled right up to the ice fortress with cannon and muskets firing from its maw: Tsar Dimitry leaped from the turret and shouted an un-Russian word: "*Vivat*."

The people of Moscow watched the scene from both banks of the river and doubt came to many of them on that day: whom had they made tsar? Was this not, perhaps, Grishka Otrepyev, Prince Romodanovsky's runaway serf who made mock of the Russian lands?

In the month of May my mother made ready to travel to Moscow. The idea had been put into her head by the vicar of St. Nicholas the Miraculous and his fat wife—to make humble petition unto the tsar to give her a village with land and serfs and animals—to obtain whatever he would grant.

We made up a train of ten wagons with poultry, salt meat, salted vegetables, pickled cabbage, pies and fulled linen. On the twelfth day of May we said our prayers and moved off. Mother wept throughout the journey and prayed that we might arrive in safety.

We arrived in Moscow at the time of the evening meal on the fourteenth of May and stayed at the Nikolsky Inn in the settlement without the Arbat Gates. We ate and mother lay down to sleep but I went out into the yard where our wagons stood. I sat on the porch and watched the yard. Three Cossacks rode into the yard, I looked and saw that the first of them was Naum; I immediately recognized him, in a good black caftan, with a sword at his side and he himself was flushed red, bad-tempered and drunk so that he could scarcely sit in his saddle.

"Hi, Satan!" shouted Naum. "Landlord, beer. . . ."

Baulin, the friend of our Kolomna tanner Afanasy and keeper of this inn, a well-fed, bald tradesman, came out onto the porch and smiled.

"Surely, Cossacks," he answered, "surely, my dear friends, my beer is cold and who should drink it if not you?"

A pock-marked girl with a walleye straightaway brought a jug of beer and offered it to Naum. He pushed back his cap, drank of the beer, blew out his breath and slipped down from his horse—he sat down on a log beside the porch.

"Dost thou favour Dimitry or the true tsar?" he asked the landlord, angrily.

Baulin smiled and stroked his beard.

"We are tradespeople," came the answer, "we are of one mind. We find that the tsar who brings good to the commune is a good tsar. Our business is trade."

"Ugh, thou old waverer, thou son of a bitch," Naum said to him. "Is Dimitry a tsar? He is an unfrocked priest, the servant of the Poles, he is Otrepiev, the worst of all thieves. He used to sweep out the Wisznieweckis' stables in Sambor. I know—I spilt my blood in his behalf at Novgorod Seversky, when we Cossacks defeated Prince Mstislavsky, I captured the standard. . . . I would have captured *Voyevoda* Mstislavsky himself if he hadn't made off into the steppes, he rode a fine horse, oh, what a horse. . . . I struck the prince three times with my sword on his iron helm—he was covered with blood. . . . God forgive us, how many Russian people we killed. . . . And for what? So that the Poles might bark at us and dishonour us in Moscow. . . . There is an order that no lead or powder be sold to us. . . . Go into a tavern and thou'rt chased from the very table. . . . But wait a while. . . ."

Naum pulled off his cap, threw it down beneath his feet and began to trample on it.

"We know whom to follow. We fight for the true faith. . . . We'll not let a single Pole leave Moscow alive!"

"There's trouble in store for thee, Naum," said Baulin, "go into the hay loft and sleep off the drink."

"No, I'm not drunk.... At least I'm not drunk from thy wine.... But wait a while, wait a while, soon we'll show you some trouble...."

Then Naum took up his cap and placed his foot in the stirrup but his horse shied away from him. Naum chased after the animal, hopping on one foot and then flopped into the saddle on his belly. The Cossacks roared and all three of them rode like mad out of the gates, through the suburb towards the Vorobyov Hills—there was nothing to be seen but the dust and the chickens that fled from their path.

Next day we had a cart harnessed and drove to the Kremlin, to the Cathedral of the Assumption where we attended service; after praying we visited Shuisky in his house to ask him to intercede with the tsar for us, for the orphaned family, that he might give us land.

The Lord Prince Vasily Ivanovich Shuisky came out on to the porch to greet us, mother bowed low from the waist and I bowed to the ground although we had no suspicion that the stockily built old man in a green sable coat who stood before us, was no longer a mere prince but two days hence would become tsar. His beard was sparse and like that of a peasant, his face was bloated, his cheeks twitched and his eyes—the eyes of a great mind—looked through slits so that you could not look into them.

The Lord Prince spoke to us in a feeble voice and with a sigh:

"I will make representation concerning thy poverty in the proper place, Princess, but wait, wait, oh, wait. Today we all put our trust in God.... And thy husband, Prince Leonty Turennev, I remember him well—under Tsar Fyodor he sat three places lower than me: I, then Prince Mstislavsky, then Prince Golitsyn, then the Tver Prince of the House of Patrikeyev and then came Turennev's place: he held his *voyevodship* in a border

regiment and in the main army he was the Third *Voyevoda*. See that thy boy learns this."

The prince stroked my head and sent us away.

At sunrise the next day mother and I wanted to go to the market on Red Square. But 'twas in vain, so great was the multitude. The people stood like a solid wall—sons of boyars, soldiers, Persians, Tatars in long brightly-coloured robes, Poles in blue and white caftans, some with wings on their shoulders and our people in green or brown, all in dark clothes.

Wagons rattled over the log roads. Or a boyar in a Grecian helmet with a crest would gallop past, grooms with whips clearing the road before him—and again a crush of people.

Under the walls of the Kremlin stood public scribes shouting: "I write for a kopek!" Hungry priests who had not broken their fast stood waiting for somebody to bury or marry and showing a loaf of bread they cried "See, I am about to eat of it." * *Sbilen* ** and cake vendors shouted loudly. Blind men trilled on their pipes. Legless and noseless beggars crawled between our feet and tugged at the skirts of our coats. Goods were displayed in the booths and there was a lively trade. The tradespeople would shout from behind their counters "Come to us, come to us, the boyar has bought from us!" Should one approach a counter the tradesman would seize hold of him, jump up and down in front of him and should he wish to depart they would curse him and strike him with a roll of cloth to make him buy something. Farther along, on Ilyinka Street, people sat on benches with earthenware pots on their heads while Gypsies clipped their hair—Ilyinka Street was covered with hair like with a felt mat.

Mother took great fear at this unseemly noise so that her

* The service could only be read by a priest who had not broken his fast; the priest is indicating that those in need of him must hurry.

** *Sbilen*—a hot spiced drink made from honey.

legs began to tremble. We returned to the inn and went early to bed. In the night mother awakened me whispering: "Dress thyself with haste." A candle stood upon the table and mother's face was as white as flour, her lips trembled and she whispered: "The landlord came and bid us hide: he said that troops are entering Moscow, that they are already in the city."

We could hear the trampling of many feet and the rumble of countless wagons but not a voice was to be heard—they marched in silence. Somebody knocked suddenly at the inn gates and ordered that they be opened. Mother grasped me and we hid in the hayloft and until morning we lay listening, expecting at any moment they would break into the inn yard.

On the morrow we learned that Prince Golitsyn had entered Moscow with eighteen thousand troops and that there was rebellion in the Kremlin—the soldiers there demanded their wages for three months in advance and threatened to leave the tsar and join Prince Golitsyn; Shuisky, 'twas said, was a sick man but some people said that he had been seen on horseback near the Arbat Gates during the night.

At breakfast a man of God appeared in the yard—he was naked except for a pair of ragged breeches and on a chain around his neck hung padlocks, horseshoes and an iron cross. Mother glanced at him, her whole face changed and she put down her spoon. The man of God laughed, his face wrinkled and he stretched his neck; he began stamping on the ground like a goose and muttered:

"Whom did they kill in Uglich, eh? Do ye know? . . . They've killed the same one again now, I saw it myself, myself. . . . Here it is. . . ." He held out a piece of rag soaked in blood. "Smell it, 'tis worth your while, a tsar's blood smells like honey. . . . And when you begin killing him a third time send for me. . . ."

I saw that my mother was digging her fingernails into the

table and had fallen back on to the bench. The people sprinkled her with water into which hot coals had been cast and she sprang up.

"They've killed the tsar!" she screamed. "And you're here banging spoons.... Come, come, hasten..." and she pulled me away from the table by my hand and we ran to the city.

At the Borovitsky Gates of the Kremlin we were turned back—in the gateway and on the bridge across the Neglinnaya stood Cossack wagons, and tethered horses; cauldrons boiled on campfires and Cossacks were shouting from the far bank:

"The Poles have cast the Sacred Host out from the Cathedral of the Assumption.... They have hurled the sacred relics from the Monastery of the Miracle.... They will drive all men to accept the Polish faith...."

People were running along the Neglinnaya River—shouts, crowds and the howls of women.... As we looked the folk gathered in a crowd—they were beating somebody. A Pole burst out of the crowd, defending himself with his sword, and sprang into the Neglinnaya and swam away. From the far bank the Cossacks fired their muskets at him.

We ran as far as Red Square whence the crowd carried us along the wall to the Cathedral of St. Basil. All the domes of the Cathedral—scarlet, green, twisted—all gleamed in the sunlight. Bells rang alarmingly, the great bell Ivan Veliky clanged out.

Together with the crowd we were hustled to the hilltop, to the rostrum—the crowd pressed around the tribune, silent and bareheaded. On an oaken bench on the tribune lay a naked man with a distended stomach, his left leg was broken and his nakedness covered with a rag, his hands were folded on his navel and his face could not be seen—'twas covered with a mask, a dried sheep's head.

"Who lies yonder, who is it?" asked my mother.

Many voices answered her.

"Tsar."

"The Christian Russian tsar lies yonder."

"No tsar but an unfrocked priest, a thief."

"No, 'tis not he who lies there."

"God have mercy upon us!"

"He's a deal thinner, yon's a sturdy fellow...."

"Then where is he?"

"He's gone...."

A man broke out of the crowd and made his way to the rostrum, approached the dead body—I looked and perceived that 'twas Naum again. His mouth had been hurt, his eyes and cheeks were covered in blood, his hair was torn and tangled.

"Here is the Holy Cross," screamed Naum and, facing the rosy domes of the Cathedral, crossed himself, "here on the bench lies Tsar Dimitry, the unfrocked priest, the thief.... Believe me.... I have shed my blood for him, may he be accursed.... He was tormented but little.... He must be tortured more...."

A painted wooden pipe suddenly appeared in Naum's hand and he did place it in the hand of the dead man.... Having done this Naum clapped his hands, opened his injured mouth—he obviously wanted to laugh, but he staggered and fell flat on the ground.

The crowd was in an uproar, the women screamed in mad voices. Just then a cannon was fired from the Kremlin wall, the bells rang out the signal of good tidings, the gates opened and out rode the boyars—in front of them all Vasily Shuisky in a golden fur-lined robe like that of a tsar. We were pushed and trampled upon but by some means did make our way to the Moskva River. On the far side, the district called Zamoskvorechye, there was shooting; the Cossacks and the people of the suburbs were killing the Poles and destroying their strongholds,

And so mother and I returned empty-handed to Kolomna. 'Twas an ill life that began then. The serfs from our estate had almost all fled—they had either been lured to the Cossacks or had fled from the taxgatherers, and wandered forth into the world.

When it was known that in Moscow Vasily Ivanovich Shuisky had been declared tsar the people said: "That's the business of the Shuiskys and Golitsyns, but Vasily is nothing to us, what sort of tsar is he, we did not kiss the cross in allegiance to him, we kissed the cross for Dimitry but he went away from Moscow dressed in the garb of a woman and is expected back on the first day of October, on Intercession Day."

And so it came to pass. In the autumn Prince Shakhovskoy whom Shuisky had sent as *voyevoda* to Putivl, raised the town in behalf of Tsar Dimitry, and *Voyevoda* Telyatevsky raised Chernigov. The serfs took up arms. The outlaws came forth from the forests. The Mordovians advanced on Nizhny Novgorod. Prince Khvorostin, the *Voyevoda* of Astrakhan, joined the revolt. Shuisky's troops were defeated at Tula and at Ryazan. The Time of Troubles had begun.

And, verily, on Intercession Day Dimitry was declared to be alive. He came out of the Lithuanian Marches at the head of his Cossacks. From Ryazan trainbands headed by the *Voyevoda* Prokopy Lyapunov flocked to his standard and from Tula came Istoma Pashkov also with his trainbands. Near Moscow they joined forces with him who was called Dimitry and encamped at the village of Kolomenskoye.

In Kolomna 'twas only the vicar who did not believe in the man who had been called Dimitry and shouted:

"The devil is leading you astray, you half-witted yokels! Tsar Dimitry has been murdered. This new Dimitry—he's a thief and I know him. His name is Bolotnikov. He was a serf belonging to Prince Telyatevsky and he ran away and was imprisoned by the Tatars and the Tatars sold him to the Turks for whom he worked in the galleys. He fled from the Turks to the city of Venice and from there made his way back to

Russia, accursed be his name. . . . Today he is sending his treasonable messages to the cities."

The vicar displayed Bolotnikov's proclamations in the market place and read them aloud:

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Unto all of you serfs and tenant farmers we order that you kill your boyars and their wives and destroy their estates taking the land unto yourselves. And we order you, artisans of the town suburbs, to kill off the merchants and all tradespeople, to take their cattle and to take unto yourselves their wives and daughters. And for this we would give unto all you humble people the rank of boyar and *voyevoda* and court ministers. . . ."

After Christmas the rabble broke into Kolomna mounted on sixscore sleighs. Mother heard the tocsin sounding the alarm, dressed herself and me, took down the icons and wrapped them in a tablecloth and together we went without the gates. The frost was fierce, the moon stood high and clear. Sleighs filled with the rabble raced past us down the street. Some of them wore fur coats, others the robes of the priesthood. They lashed their horses, waved their feet in the air and screamed—all of them were drunk. . . . At the church of St. Nicholas the Miraculous the big bell was being wildly rung. The robbers drove to the market place and thronged around the *voyevoda's* house—they beat at the gates and broke open the shutters. Mother and I returned to our cottage.

Even in our cottage we could hear somebody screaming out there on the market place. Oh, murderers! . . . The vicar's fat wife told us later that she had herself seen them drag the *voyevoda* out of his house into the snow, tear his coat and shirt off his back and with knives cut strips of flesh from his back—they tortured him to death trying to find out where the treasure was hidden.

We did not lock the gates for 'twas of no avail, the robbers would only break them down. Mother placed the picture of

Our Lady Intercessor on the table and lit a candle before it. And we sat down on a bench to await our death. Suddenly we heard the snow crunch—they were coming!

"Farewell, my son, my darling, forgive me for the sake of Christ," said mother, crossing herself and pressing me to her.

The door was kicked open and the bandits entered. At their head came Naum. He did not remove his cap, did not greet us but said in a hoarse voice:

"You've eaten our bread till you are sate. . . Now go. . ."

"Naum?" asked my mother tearfully, "is it thou?"

"I was called Naum. . . Now I am your overlord. . . Take thy pup and go forth where thou wilt. . . 'Tis thy good fortune that I am here."

Mother and I took up the bundle with the holy icons and went forth from our house into the bitter frost. The *voyevoda's* house was burning like a torch. Whither could we go? The snow reached our knees. The good Lord put it into our heads to knock at the vicar's gate. For a long time the gate was not opened then I looked up and saw a tousled head appear above the gates. It was the vicar himself who recognized us and let us in.

From that time we lived with the vicar in a tiny dark room or cupboard. The tears we shed from grief, acrid smoke and stale bread were enough to last us all our lives.

By spring things got easier for us. At the village of Kotlov, the bandit Bolotnikov was routed by Skopin-Shuisky. The scoundrel fled to Tula where he remained in his stronghold with the self-styled Tsarevich Petrusha. In those days many such tsareviches were to be found all over the country: there was Tsarevich Yeroshka, and Tsarevich Gavrilka, and Tsarevich Martynka—all of them appeared and made merry in their own time.

Shuisky besieged Tula and flooded the town. The people of Moscow began to breathe more easily, bread was brought into the city, representatives and taxgatherers were sent out to re-

plenish the state treasury. But the fire-breathing devil, the cunning serpent, the devourer of the souls of men, punished us with another villain. Who he was nobody knew, 'twas only known that he had at one time been imprisoned in the fortress of Pro-poisk for banditry. At a certain Sunday market in Starodub he was proclaimed tsarevich, money was given to him, the Poles and the Cossacks rallied to his standard; he moved against Moscow, defeated the tsar's troops at Volkovo and set up his armed camp at Tushino where he erected an earthen rampart protected with sharpened stakes.

In the beginning the scoundrel hoped to take Moscow in battle, for thus had the Poles whispered to him. He fought against the Muscovites at the village of Ivankovo on the Khimki River, on the Yauza River and at Khodinskoye Field; he took the outer suburbs from the Muscovites but could not gain the city. Then the Tushino bandits began plundering the villages nearby. Lisovsky besieged Troitsa. Sapieha defeated Ivan Shuisky and opened the road to the north that they might plunder the northern towns.

In Moscow hunger came again while in Tushino 'twas a time of dissipation. And the common people of Moscow began deserting to the bandit's camp. The common people were followed by those in the service of the state and by the nobles—the nobles went to solicit villages from the bandit. Saltykov and Rubets-Masalsky and Khvorostin and Pleshcheyev and Velyaminov bowed their heads to him. The bandit was generous—to some he gave estates and demesnes of various sizes and still others were made boyars.

The vicar again began urging mother to travel unto Tushino and bow her head before the scoundrel and ask for a village.

"He will give away the whole land and thou wilt remain with thy child naked as a bush without leaves."

That was a terrible journey to make. Bolotnikov had been defeated in the spring, Naum and his band had fled from Kolomna and were now roaming the countryside where they boast-

ed that ere long the Ataman Baloven would come from the Volga and then they would lay waste to the land.

And so we waited until autumn. But in the autumn the bandit quarreled with the Poles, set fire to Tushino and fled to Kaluga where he again began gathering an army. And the Poles and the Russians, that had remained in Tushino, sent the boyar, Saltykov, with an embassy to the Polish King to request Prince Wladislaw to accept the throne of Muscovy. Tsar Shuisky sent his brother Dimitry with a huge army to Smolensk to fight the Poles but the Russian army was defeated by the Poles at Klushin and those Poles marched on Moscow to aid the Tushino Poles. And the bandit from Kaluga also marched on Moscow and made his camp at the village of Kolomenskoye. Such was the disorder of those times there was no understanding it.

In St. Thomas' Week a Polish colonel with his Hussars made a raid on Kolomna and plundered the houses that still stood, killed many of the people, and broke down the town ramparts and blew them up with powder. We sat in a cellar throughout the disturbances. The vicar was burned to death in his hayloft. The Hussars took his fat wife away with them. Mother and I were left without a stick, without a house and we took each of us a bag and went forth to beg alms in the name of Christ.

I recall that one morning we came out of the forest and saw below us a blue winding river and beyond the river on green hills stood white churches with golden domes; three walls surrounded the city and inside the walls were gardens and streets and tall log houses one built against the next. Mother stood and looked down at Moscow in silence, her eyes filled with tears.

By midday we reached the Serpukhov Gates. On the field under the earthen rampart in the vicinity of the gates was a great throng of people, Cossacks and soldiers, and in the middle on a wagon stood a man in a black robe, swarthy as a Gypsy, a tall man with broad shoulders, sunken eyes, a proud

face, curly beard and with the veins protruding on his neck. This man was shouting to the multitude in a husky voice:

"The best Russian people have been killed at Klushin. How long shall we bear this?... Tsar Shuisky is a man of ill luck. Shuisky must be dethroned. We need a young tsar, a simple tsar. One who would listen unto the best people so that we might believe in such a tsar and might give our lives for such a one, for the true faith and the Russian lands. The Russian churches have been desecrated. The Poles have taken the last of our cattle and have stolen our wives for themselves. The Russian lands have been laid waste. . . ."

"Dethrone him, dethrone Shuisky!" howled the throng.

Mother asked one of the artisans who that man was who cried from the wagon top.

"Canst thou not see 'tis Prokopy Lyapunov?" he answered.

That day we learned that the people had dethroned Shuisky. He was dethroned and rioting began. The common people wanted the bandit as tsar, the Lyapunovs and the soldiers and the tradespeople wanted Mikhail Romanov, the boyars wanted Prince Wladislaw. And the bandit had come from Kolomenskoye and was near unto Moscow.

And there was a great longing among the people that an end come to the troublous times. The troubles were but beginning again. Famine came again. There was no question of ploughing and sowing. The people had become so brutish from the constant fighting and poverty they did nought but wave their arms—let the devil be tsar if he will.

By this time mother had grown weak and some good people in Zamoskvorechye gave us shelter. We saw the Hetman Zolkiewski come into Moscow with Polish troops, we saw the Poles plunder and ruin the Russian people and Moscow became a province of the Polish king. The Russian land was being ruined. Only the boyars bore with the shame, the people hid themselves, consumed with a hatred that turned them to stone,

and bode their time. We saw the peasant trainbands come from Nizhny Novgorod and the northern towns under Prince Pozharsky and lay siege to Moscow. The outlying suburbs were all burnt down and of Zamoskvorechye nought remained but fires and wasteland. We began living in cellars and holes in the ground and were covered in sores. Now there was nothing left but to shrug one's shoulders in despair—and wonder how the Russian people could survive.

Obviously the limit of human endurance had been reached. No help was to be hoped for from any quarter. Nobody to trust, nothing to hope for. The hearts of the people were hardened. The Russian people captured Moscow and at last entered the desecrated Kremlin. I myself saw how they hurled barrels of salted human flesh into the Moskva River. And when one went into the Holy Churches one could do nought but wave one's hand and weep. The troublous times were over. There was little joy, however: go which way you would there was not a town or a village—wilderness and waste.

I also recall that on a warm but grey windy autumn day the people went out to the open fields near the outer suburbs of Moscow and stood bareheaded. The wind blew and there were wet birds flying overhead. A coach drove along the black, muddy road. It was drawn by two piebald horses in rope harness, the tails of the horses bound up. Behind the coach rode the boyars, the merchants and the elected best people. A frail lad with puffy eyes looked through the tiny window of the coach at the bedraggled, ragged and gloomy people. 'Twas a fearful and despondent Mikhail Romanov who was to accept the crown.

Suddenly a man in a beggar's shirt ran towards the coach—he fell into the mud on his knees and tore at his chest with his fingernails and howled. . . . I looked and saw it was Naum again. The coach moved on and Naum ran behind it all the way to the Kremlin. He ran, howled—was frantic with holy joy.

We were distantly related to the Romanovs and mother made application to the young tsar for a village and he made us a gift of Arkhangelskoye, which is nigh unto Kagopol. To travel thither, however, was certain death: on all the northern roads was the robber Ataman Baloven with bands of Lithuanian, Circassian and Russian bandits giving mercy unto none, when they caught a man they filled his ears and mouth with powder and put fire to him. 'Twas a matter of three years before these bandits were driven to Olonets and destroyed in the snow fields beyond Lake Onega; Baloven himself was brought to Moscow and hanged from a hook thrust between his ribs.

In the meantime mother and I lived in the Kremlin, in the bathhouse of the tsar's court.

After mass, on the day of the Archangel Michael, I was ordered to appear at the tsar's table—at that time I was in my seventeenth year and I sat at the doors with the children of the boyars—near the place where the table turned to form a letter L.

The tsar, a gaunt youth, came to table in his bejeweled robes, sat down, and removed his crown; on either hand of the tsar sat the Saltykovs. The tsar ate but little but most of the time leaned his head on his hands. He had thin, sparse, fair hair, there was fluff on his upper lip and his face looked tired. Boris Saltykov leaned towards him and whispered to him and the tsar raised his blue eyes and smiled—then he sent his wine cup first to one then to another of the boyars.

The boyars, however, ate their fill—they were hungry and gaunt: some were dressed in sheepskins, others in simple homespun coats. We ate for one hour, then for a second until the tsar had become quite bored. Then Saltykov ordered the singers and pipers to be called in.

The mountebanks came in. They were timid and crowded in the doorway near our table. And as I looked I saw that one of them, in a woman's sarafan and wearing a basket on

his head, was Naum: he was well fed, his beard was combed but his eyes were dull and lifeless. My heart sank.

Saltykov shouted to them:

"Come in, come in, fools, the tsar welcomes you - some with the noose, some with the whip, some with the stocks..."

The boyars laughed. The tsar nodded his head. Then Naum came to the forefront, slapped his thighs and began to speak through his nose.

"Here I am. They call me names, they call me owl. Nowadays nobody takes our maids in wedlock, they are innumerable as black beetles but the men are few, all have been killed. I am the only rich bride. Take me or leave me, as you will. I have a dowry: eight peasant farms between Lebedyan and old Kazan, eight farms without horses or cattle but with one and a half men and a quarter, four runaway serfs and two in great trouble. And there is a manor house of two posts dug into the ground covered with a third. And from these farmsteads each year are obtained grain to fill eight granaries without back walls and four poods of butter from stones. And these farmsteads have a stable in which stand four cranes and one grey horse without any hair. And from these same farmsteads comes each year a food supply forty poles of dog's tails and forty barrels of salted frogs..."

No further word could be understood, so much noise did the boyars make as they sat and shook from laughter on their benches.

Suddenly one of the courtiers arose and spoke in anger:

"Sire, order that man to be placed under arrest. Last year he caught me on the Serpukhov Road and robbed me and beat me almost unto death... He is a bandit, a robber chief."

The tsar arose, folded his arms and looked at the Saltykovs.

"Very good, very good," he said. "we'll arrest him... I will judge him myself." Again he smiled. "The fool has

but told the truth, boyars, four stabled cranes is the worth of our kingdom...."

Naum was arrested and the next day the tsar ordered him to be sent to Preobrazhensky Monastery. There Naum was shorn and took the monkish name of Niphont. Since that day many years have passed.

I married, had seven children and buried my mother. The whole large family lived on our Oryol estate. Tsar Mikhail died. Wars began again: we fought with good fortune and ill. Moscow was rebuilt, the walls were strengthened, turrets and palaces were built in the Kremlin and a new order was brought to the city. Moscow grew rich but there was no tranquility in the state: the serfs, the common people and the peasants who tilled the fields of the estates began to flee and seek freedom on the Don and the Volga. The tsar sought strength, the boyars and public servants, wealth, and the people freedom. And now, 'tis said, there is again a disturbance on the Lower Volga, the Cossack Ataman Razin has revolted. Perhaps 'tis so and perhaps 'tis nought but idle chatter. .

For many years already pious people and pilgrims who come into our house as they pass our way have been saying to us:

"Go to Preobrazhensky Monastery, for the love of Christ, and bow your heads before the holy Niphont."

And we said unto the pious people:

"We have known this Niphont in the past, tell us about his deeds, we would see him again."

And the passers-by said:

"He was at one time a great murderer and criminal. In the monastery he became a cloistered monk, lay in a coffin and took neither food nor drink in order that he might die more quickly. For a long while he lay in the coffin in his cell. One night the whole monastery was awakened—they heard Niphont screaming in the voice of a madman. They went to him in his cell and saw Niphont sitting up in his

coffin and blaspheming Christ and the Mother of God, and cursing horribly and grating his teeth. The brethren fled from him in great fear. They rang the bell. The brethren gathered in the church and prayed the whole night. Niphont walked around the church and shook the doors—he could not break them open so he threw himself at the window, leaned against the bars and shouted profane words. By morning he became calm.

“At midday he was found in a grove in the swamp: Niphont lay flat on the ground, naked, with mosquitoes all over him and badly bitten by them. The Father Superior would have spoken with him but he jumped up and ran away to the far fringe of the swamp where the insects covered him again.

“The Father Superior ordered bread to be taken and placed near his head. Niphont began eating small pieces of bread, just enough to keep him alive and continue torturing himself. His whole body was covered with sores and scabs, the insects no longer alighted on him but still he could not die. Then Niphont went to the Father Superior and asked for his blessing and some work. The Father ordered him to take oxen and a plough. Niphont took the oxen and ploughed a huge strip of land beyond the river. All winter he felled wood and brought it to the monastery to build cells, he took upon himself the heaviest work. In spring he harrowed his land and planted oats. For a whole year he did not say a word and at night he would castigate himself. ’Twas said that the oats would not grow in Niphont’s field. But the oats grew and the ears formed and a rich harvest was reaped. Niphont gathered his harvest and was happier. Still his mouth did not open nor did he make his toil easier. He has been silent already for twenty years. He has grown old and holy now. Pious people bring him their children, he takes them in his arms, kisses them and looks them in the eyes and the children grow better for it.”

This is what strangers told us concerning Niphont. At the time of the last Fast of St. Peter I went with my family to pray. We visited the Preobrazhensky Monastery. 'Twas a marvelous place: the monastery is on the banks of a river in a birch forest and behind its high walls there is peace and tranquility.

A servant of the monastery who was with us showed us Niphont. The holy man came out of a birch grove, he was thin, tall and straight wearing a black robe that reached to the ground, a monk's tall hat with a white cross. He walked easily. From under his headdress he looked at us with the eyes of a holy man, the bright eyes of one who is not of this earth.

He approached us, stopped, bowed low and walked on as though his feet did not touch the grass.

1922





LOVELY LADY

A PACKAGE containing secret military documents of exceptional importance was handed to Nikita Alexeyevich Obozov. And both the handing over of the documents and the departure of Nikita Alexeyevich were attended by the strictest secrecy.

He was immensely pleased at being sent on this long and hazardous journey abroad. His civilian suit, his green passport in three languages, his suitcase, the lock of which clicked so smartly when his packing was done—all of these presaged wonderful days ahead—days he was sure would begin the minute he took his suitcase and steamer rug in hand.

Early in the morning Obozov went to the station, had a cup of coffee, and without hiring a porter, entered his first-class compartment.

When the train started, Obozov transferred the little canvas bag containing the documents from his suitcase to his vest pocket, fastened it with a safety pin, and then stretched himself out luxuriously on the plush lounge. Beside him lay the books and magazines he had brought along to read on the train. After he had leafed through them, he lighted a cigarette and looked out the window, dreaming about the various countries and thousands of people destined to pass before his eyes.

The express flew past the still snow-covered summer cottages, evergreen forests and moss-grown swamps of Finland. In due time, a porter entered the car and announced that breakfast was served. The passengers made their way to the diner, holding on to the swaying walls for support. A sharp wind

raised clouds of snow dust on the platform between the cars. Nikita Alexeyevich took a seat in a corner of the diner and glanced about him.

Over there sat a plainish family of English people with three fair-haired little girls and a Japanese nursemaid; for more than a fortnight they had been traveling from Vladivostok. On the other side were four Frenchmen—short, flushed, black-bearded; they ordered a bottle of red wine, and sat smacking their lips over it. Then there were some virtuous-looking Finns from Helsingfors; a huge, clean-shaven Swede, the director of some sort of enterprise; a high-cheekboned Moscow merchant going to Haparanda to buy goods (he had adopted a European style which obviously lowered his dignity); a broad shouldered, glum young fellow in a knitted ski cap, and a few other nondescript, uninteresting figures. There were some women, of course, but Nikita Alexeyevich avoided looking at them; there was no reason for looking at the ugly ones and he was afraid to look at the pretty ones.

He had not had much success with women. In his youth he had worshipped from afar the famous courtesan Masha Khlebnikova, a charming and beautiful woman. He had never tried to approach her, though there had been opportunities, and he had keenly suffered from the chiding of his fellow officers. The conflicting emotions which resulted left their imprint for the rest of his life. He loathed "men of the world" who were satisfied with very little and looked for only one thing in a woman—that which suited their need and convenience.

That morning at the station, as he had been hastening to the train with his suitcase, Obozov had noticed a tall woman in a smart velvet coat. Her small hat trimmed with black wings was tipped to the side of her head. The woman seemed out of sorts, as though she had not had enough sleep, and she was quarreling with the conductor.

He again met her on the train, in the adjoining car, then on the platform, where she was holding on to her hat and the

collar of her coat against the efforts of the wind. And finally he saw her at a window near his compartment. She was leaning against the varnished window frame, watching the fields of snow, the trees, the telephone poles and houses slide past. There was a certain sadness about her oval face turned to the monotonous plains. Her open neck was delicate and graceful. White lace gleamed at the throat of her knitted silk blouse.

Sitting in the corner of his compartment, Obozov could see her fluffy fair hair piled high on her head, the line of her back, which twitched with the jerking of the train, the well-tailored skirt which just touched the tops of her high-laced patent-leather shoes. When it seemed that he must find out where and why she was traveling in those disturbed times, Nikita Alexeyevich took himself in hand, and reaching for a volume of adventure stories, buried himself in his reading.

Suddenly a stream of cold air entered his compartment, bringing a whiff of bitter, delicate perfume. Obozov caught sight of the folds of a blue skirt disturbed by the movement of feet. He re-read his page. The woman was now standing at the window with her back to the door.

Turning to the snow dust outside the window, he gave a short laugh and thought: and so after reaching the age of 33 and acquiring poise you've become a coward at last. . . . But there was something very pathetic and disturbingly exciting about that woman. Who was she? Simply a seeker of adventure? Hardly that. Or was she a bird caught in the dreadful storm of war, frantically flying she knew not where? At any rate, all this required clearing up. When he glanced out into the corridor, the woman had already left the window, and she did not appear for lunch.

Now as he sat at a corner table in the diner waiting for the tray of food which would be brought him by a waiter in blue tails and celluloid collar, he was filled with a sense of peace and satisfaction. After so much hard work, there could be no

greater pleasure than to lounge here against the soft pillows of the car, relaxed and carefree, observing these people with all their trifling concerns, and watching the country skimming past the window. Everything seemed a bit unreal. For some unaccountable reason Nikita Alexeyevich had a sharp recollection of the frozen furrows of a certain field swept by an icy wind; the rugged backs of soldiers behind mounds of earth; the sting in his eyes of sand and frozen dust; the ring of single shots; idleness, boredom, the expectation of night; an endless chain of clouds, heavy as mountains. It was the ghoulish trance preceding death. Man seemed degraded to the last degree, beggared and frozen like the earth itself.

Obozov shuddered and quickly raised his eyes. The lovely lady was standing at his table asking for the third time, now with a smile on her lips, if she might occupy the place opposite him.

Obozov jumped up and held her chair for her, embarrassed by his own haste. When he had taken his seat again he remembered his resolution of the morning and looked straight into the woman's eyes. She returned his gaze with her melancholy dark grey eyes. For a moment his head spun and he became oblivious of the diner crackling with voices, of the Frenchmen smacking their lips over their bottle and the Swede blowing wreaths of smoke from his cigar.

The woman placed her gloves on the table near the frosty window, opened her handbag, glanced at herself in the mirror—attentively but without interest—passed her little finger over her lips and the edge of her delicate nostrils, snapped her bag shut and asked:

"Have you tried the fish? Is it safe?" her voice was low and almost severe.

"Excellent fish. Cod," answered Nikita Alexeyevich eagerly, offering her the plattet. She thanked him. He began to wonder what else he could say about cod: it was a fish which swam north in large schools in the warm waters of the Gulf

Stream, skirting the northern coast of Norway; there it quickly grew large and fat, reaching a tremendous size at Murman.

The woman interrupted his thoughts.

"I am a Russian," she said, "both by name and birth, yet I am fleeing from Russia as from the plague." She raised her sombre grey eyes. "I hate Russia."

Nikita Alexeyevich laughed and said, "Why?" Then he bowed and introduced himself.

"My name," continued the woman, "is Ludmilla Stepanovna Pavzhinskaya. You ask why I am running away?" Throwing back her head she looked at him as though considering whether he were worthy of her confidence. "Oh, it's true, I hate Russia, I hate it," and she laughed, arresting the piece of bread she had been raising to her mouth.

Her penetrating look, the strange manner in which she opened the conversation, her clever and mirthless laugh, all indicated a complicated nature. Obozov was conscious of this and kept on his guard.

"My esthetic sense has been violated," said the woman. "I love beauty, poetry, paintings, marbles, music, but most of all I admire people. I am irritated by the thought that, at this moment, there are wonderful people living somewhere on the earth, while every day in Moscow I am forced to look at a weak, awkward, morally unbalanced, bespectacled creature with a yellow beard, carrying around a box of laxatives in his vest pocket, wearing dirty linen, speaking in a squeaky voice, threatening hysterics on the slightest occasion. Live in such surroundings? Never! I'm going to America."

"As though you could find real people there!"

"People who are attractive and courageous. First-class people. Certainly nothing like those in Russia."

"We also have courageous people."

"Oh, nonsense. Everything here is wretched as though it were servants' quarters. Everything in imitation of our betters, only worse—with a crimson cravat framing a coarse mug. Let's

He glanced at Ludmilla Stepanovna. With head bent toward him she was listening attentively and seemed to be moved by his words. Her forehead, half covered by a lock of hair, was drawn in a frown.

"There are moments which are remembered a lifetime," she said slowly.

"I don't know. I haven't experienced that. To be sure one doesn't forget the foolishness of one's youth—you're right there."

"Oh no. Moments of sadness, of passion, descending like a whirlwind...."

Nikita Alexeyevich frowned: "Why should she go so fast—too fast?..." He lowered his eyes and felt that he was hostile and on his guard. The woman moved away from the table. He did not see what she was doing. He only heard a few light sighs and firmly compressed his lips. Clearly there was no longer smooth sailing, and all feelings rushed to the nearest exit, to the shortest and the simplest, beyond which there could be only emptiness, indifference, annoyance, and weariness. He lighted a match and glanced up. Ludmilla Stepanovna was standing at the wall with her hands behind her back.

"You are easily frightened," she said.

"Yes, you are quite right."

"Turned pale at the rustle of a skirt, poor thing."

"What can I say? If I didn't like you, things would be much simpler."

"You like me? Strange. I thought you consider me only a persistent female and had turned coward." She lowered her brows above angry eyes and tapped her heel on the floor. "Let me assure you that you are mistaken."

"Very well." Nikita Alexeyevich laughed. "I humbly beg your pardon."

"What for? It seems to me you have behaved with rare modesty."

Her delicate nostrils dilated, her heel tapped the floor, the shadow of her lowered lashes trembled on her cheek. "A spirited steed," thought Nikita Alexeyevich, and suddenly he was flooded with a warmth of tenderness. He held out his hand. She angrily shook her head.

"The secret lies in the fact that I have always been afraid of women," he said sincerely. "Got burnt when I was young. . . . Women's wiles lure us on and scare us off." (She snorted contemptuously.) "Do you remember 'the glorious star of love,' Ludmilla Stepanovna? I remember dreaming of this 'glorious star' out on a frozen field among pools of blood. I had a friend who was madly in love. 'They can't kill me,' he used to say. 'Try shooting the starry skies! That's me.' Of course they killed him in the end. But to have a reach like that—up to the stars—that's a fine thing. And I'm always afraid of substituting something else for the real thing. Instead of glory—something almost the same—but not the same. Rush in, burn up, break off, and look into a woman's eyes that had already become empty. Do you understand? You don't? What can be done with a fellow who craves 'the glorious star of love'?"

He laughed, forcibly took Ludmilla Stepanovna's hand and kissed it tenderly. She did not draw it away. She sighed and sat down beside him. He continued to tell her about himself, about his comrades, and about death on a frozen field. She became calm and quiet. When her fair head finally drooped until it touched his shoulder, he stopped, smiled, and rose carefully as he said, "I have worn you out. Go to sleep, go to sleep," and tiptoed out of the compartment.

When the door had closed behind him, Ludmilla Stepanovna opened her eyes, clenched her fist and struck it against the velvet cushion.

* * *

At midnight she was visited by the broad-shouldered young fellow in the ski cap. He sat down on the divan, thrust his huge

boots up against the varnished wall, blew a cloud of smoke from his pipe, and said:

"Better hurry."

Ludmilla Stepanovna did not answer. With her hairpins in her teeth, she had raised her arms to adjust her hair. Her sleepy eyes and her cheeks seemed withered, but all her movements were sharp and vicious. She brushed the young man with her elbow and hissed through the hairpins:

"You're in my way. Get out of here with that pipe of yours."

He moved over, stuck his pipe lazily into his pocket, and said:

"Have to finish everything before we reach the border. Be hard for me to get across. You're running the risk of having to go on all alone."

"You'll get across all right. I refuse to go on alone. You should know that better than me."

"Hum-m. But if I get shot?"

Ludmilla Stepanovna shrugged her shoulders. After a brief silence, the young man asked even more lazily:

"What's the trouble, doesn't he like you?"

The woman flew into a rage. Her hair came tumbling down, her face jerked and became distorted, her lovely lips sputtered forth meaningless phrases, now arrogant, now whimpering. Fearing the noise, the young man slipped out of the compartment.

Out on the platform he leaned against an iron post and smoked his pipe. The wind and snow cut into his hard, square face; in the darkness his squinting eyes distinguished the even white fields and the dark triangles of stunted pines; above the earth flared the pale radiance of the northern lights.

In a few minutes Ludmilla Stepanovna appeared on the platform wrapped in coat and shawl. She said with a frown:

"His door is chained from the inside. He is careful."

The young man placed himself between her and the wind, and they had a talk.

* * *

Nikita Alexeyevich slept long and soundly. It seems he had pleasant dreams. As he was dressing, he removed a long blond hair from his button with a smile. How fortunate that everything had ended so well last night. Otherwise he would now be sitting with a headache smoking cigarettes. As it was, he had the satisfaction of enjoying a victory, however small. His head was clear, all his muscles tense, his heart beating strongly and evenly. And ahead of him stretched the prospect of several days of charming proximity to her, of further talks, every word of which would remove another barrier to understanding. The morning was cold and sunny.

Obozov saw little of the lovely lady that day. When she met him she was wearing the hat with wings, glanced with weary eyes through her veil, complained of a headache and said that she was worried about her baggage. And indeed, when they reached the station on the border he found her sitting at a table covered with oilcloth among all the passengers, trunks, packages and dirty plates, looking so pathetic with her fist pressed against her cheek that Nikita Alexeyevich was moved to pity. He watched her from a distance, thinking, "Going to America. But she's probably lying; all her nerves are on edge—hides her face in the morning; talks cheap, but her eyes are unhappy; can't calm or caress her because she doesn't want to be calmed and caressed; she'll either end up in a psychiatric institution or else poison herself in a fit of temper."

He wanted badly to sit down and talk to her, but he was prevented by all the fuss with the baggage and passports, then the crossing of the border on sleds, and the customs inspection. It was after six o'clock when his things were brought to a warm, low little restaurant near the Swedish station. Here everything was clean and white and smelled of fresh paint. Coffee was boil-

ing over an alcohol stove and the kerosene lamp up under the ceiling was humming like a bumblebee. Beyond the frames of the square windows stretched the polar night. Travelers arrived on sleds. Obozov put on his hat and went out. Lights were playing along the northern horizon, filling a blue stretch of starry sky with pale moribund light. Higher in the zenith burned the bright constellations. Frosty, luminous snow covered stretches of field relieved by the darkening wedges of firs. Everything here seemed defunct, as though it had lived out its day. And in that dark wilderness he clearly felt the beating of a living heart. Close at hand he heard snow crunch. He looked up. Through the dusk skied a tall figure in sweater and knitted cap. Only a flash of eyes could be made out, the face was indistinguishable, and immediately the figure disappeared behind some low buildings.

"What could that mean?" thought Nikita Alexeyevich, recalling the eyes flashing like those of a cat. But immediately his thoughts reverted to Ludmilla Stepanovna, to her life as barren and lonely as that plain and the fear of death which agitated her poor heart. And he felt that after all it had not been so heroic of him to save her from temptation. He had deeply wounded her last evening by his overwhelming superiority. Had read her a sermon—had even quoted poetry. Ugh!

He grunted and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. Now his mind groped with a sense of danger toward some duty unfulfilled. A door banged behind him, and in the square of yellow light coming from the window of the restaurant he made out a woman's figure. Nikita Alexeyevich strode over to meet her.

"Keep to the left," he called. "There's a snow bank here." And going over to Ludmilla Stepanovna, he took her still warm ungloved hand, and kissed it.

She was very close to him, raising her face to him trustfully.

"I was looking for you," she said softly.

He watched the reflection of the northern lights on her sad and delicate face. Her large eyes were in shadow, and the pupils reflected the sparkle of the stars. He found her lovely. Her little hand lay motionless on the sleeve of his coat.

"Poor little darling!"

Her expression remained unchanged. The lovely mouth was serious. He bent and kissed her lips. She sighed. Her grey fur was open, giving a glimpse of her neck and a thread of pearls. Nikita Alexeyevich carefully fastened her collar and repeated: "Poor little thing." From far away came the prolonged whistle of the train.

* * *

Once more lying in the compartment with a blue lamp above his bed, Nikita Alexeyevich kept whispering to himself:

"Magic. Sorcery."

Not another word had been spoken between them out there in the snow. Ludmilla Stepanovna must be sleeping now. All the thoughts and feelings of Nikita Alexeyevich were concentrated with extraordinary intensity on that unknown woman sleeping on the other side of the wall. Could that be other than sorcery?

Suddenly he jumped up, unpacked his suitcase, took out his razor, and shaved. He had not the slightest desire to sleep. Again he recalled the lines: "Glorious star of love, never again to shine above, Oh, my Rathmir." He laughed, buttoned his vest, and went out into the corridor. The train had made its first stop at a little snow-bound station. Beside the train walked a rosy-cheeked soldier in a collar and cap of white goatskin, looking exactly like a doll. A broad-shouldered man in a sweater quickly appeared from among the snowy firs, walked along the station platform, glanced in a window, and jumped on the train. His eyes were those of the man on skis, and in general his face was extremely familiar. "Strange," thought Nikita Ale-

xeyevich, reaching up to feel the canvas package on his breast, and again he felt absurdly, incongruously happy.

During the night he woke up several times and repeated, "glorious star of love." Then he laughed, struck the pillow with his fist, and again fell asleep. Once he distinguished a man's angry voice accusing someone of delay and cowardice. "The continent, the continent," repeated the voice, finally dissolving and merging with the clatter of the wheels.

The next day slipped past like a dream. Ludmilla Stepanovna was reticent and particularly touching with a sort of humble submissiveness. When Obozov called her to breakfast, she answered "Very well," and immediately went out ahead of him, holding on to the coat she had thrown across her shoulders. Several times he caught her puzzled gaze fixed on him, and each time she started and turned her eyes away. All of this was incomprehensible, delightful, and disturbing.

The train entered wooded mountains covered with snow. Beyond the windows of the diner passed a panorama of frozen waterfalls, bridges, dark walls of forests, and the little red houses out of Ibsen's plays.

Glancing at the timetable (which indicated that in a few minutes there would be a station), Ludmilla Stepanovna leaned toward the window, and said:

"See that red roof on the hill? If I could only live there until spring. . . . Strange as it may seem, I love solitude, snow, and clean rooms. No one has ever thought of using me as just a good companion."

She shook her head as she looked out the window, then frowned as the train whistled to announce its arrival at the station.

"Wouldn't you be bored by solitude?" asked Nikita Alexeyevich.

A strange thing happened: she turned sharply to the other passengers in the diner, then fixed a desperate, unseeing gaze on Nikita Alexeyevich, finally dropping her head to search for .

something in her handbag, so that her face was hidden by her hair.

"To slip mysteriously away from everybody, without any baggage—and stay here for the winter—madness, of course. . . ." she whispered.

The train came to a standstill. Quick, disordered ideas besieged the brain of Nikita Alexeyevich, but he remained seated. Outside the window a Swede in a Persian lamb hat bearing an official badge raised his hand. The shriek of the locomotive pierced the very brain. The train began to move. Ludmilla Stepanovna unclasped her hands and seemed to relax.

After that they stood in the corridor for the hundredth time; then they entered the compartment and muttered meaningless words, fearful of their movements and the contact of their hands. Nikita Alexeyevich did not take his eyes off her, and every hair of her head seemed to grow more and more seductive. When their eyes met the roar of the train subsided and time stood still.

A fat man in a wrinkled, mouse-coloured coat walked past the open door of their compartment. On seeing the beautiful woman, he suddenly stumbled, dropped his cigar, and said: "Beg your pardon." Ludmilla Stepanovna's chin trembled. Obozov closed the glass door and drew the curtain. She continued to laugh. Then he drew her to him, embraced her and began to cover her face with kisses. At first she silently resisted, but suddenly springing up, she cried in despair:

"Not that, I implore you. Not here. Not now." Her face was painfully distorted.

Nikita Alexeyevich clasped his head in his hands and left the compartment. In the corridor he ran into someone who quickly jumped back. In his own compartment, Obozov threw himself down on the bed.

* * *

He was roused by a sense of her presence, and he quickly sat up. In the doorway stood Ludmilla Stepanovna clasping something to her breast with both hands. The blue light gleamed above her head. His whole body was drawn toward her, but he instantly dropped his arms, so horrified was the expression in her wide eyes.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, and suddenly understood what was happening and all that had happened during the past three days. "Put down my coat," he gasped. When she staggered to the door, he quickly grabbed her thin, helpless arm above the elbow and kept repeating hoarsely, "You've gone mad, you've gone mad...."

With a helpless moan she dropped his coat.

"I only wanted to see ... I don't need it.... There was nothing else to do.... His orders.... He is merciless—would inform against me.... Kill me.... I haven't touched anything.... Here, take it...."

Her whole body trembled as she watched Obozov quickly and clumsily putting on his coat.

Then he got up and, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, looked the door and took out a revolver, immediately thrusting it into his pocket.

"It will be necessary for you to leave the train at the next station."

"Thank you," she answered under her breath.

"Wait," he interrupted harshly. "You must understand that I can't let you go. Although I've been lucky enough to escape, some one else will be your victim. Sit down."

She sat down, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

Then he said, without the faintest idea why, "What made you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie. I love you."

This was unexpected, preposterous, insolent.

"Don't dare say such a thing," muttered Obozov.

"I swear it."

She even started up, the better to see him; convinced that he would never believe her again, she nevertheless continued to asseverate her love in a strange, false voice. He wanted to strike her, but his throat went dry with revulsion.

"Strike me or kill me, what difference does it make?" she said in a quiet voice which sounded sleepy. "When you kissed me out there in the snow, I knew that I loved you. I have loved you for two days. Never has anyone been so dear to me. I am a thief, a spy; I have sold myself. You do not know what my life has been. But before you I am innocent—my darling, my beloved, my adored. . . ."

Her teeth chattered.

"What nonsense are you muttering? I forbid it, do you hear? Silence!" he cried, clenching his fist.

Ludmilla Stepanovna dropped her head, and he could hear her swallowing hard.

"Have you an accomplice?"

She nodded.

"You were to hand him the stolen documents? Is he on our train? The fellow in the knitted cap? I thought so."

He purposely spoke in a loud, decisive voice. The air was close in the compartment. In the vague blue light the hunched figure of Ludmilla Stepanovna seemed smaller and more defenceless than ever. Clearing his throat, he said:

"I am going out—you remain here."

Once in the corridor, he wiped his brow with his handkerchief. "Of course she's lying! The sighs and the tears and that crazy kiss. A smart woman all right. Another minute and—my God! irremediable! Phoo!" Stumbling and muttering, he moved away from the compartment. "Oh no, my fine lady, no standing on ceremony with the likes of you! If I'd been anyone else—bang with the revolver, and then take me in custody. And that would have been the thing to do."

From the platform, Nikita Alexeyevich suddenly caught a

marvelous view. The train was encircling the steep slope of a mountain ridge, shaped like a horseshoe. Far beneath the overhanging cliffs, an enormous long lake lay flooded with moonlight. A round moon hung low above jagged peaks. Blinding masses of snow alternated with the black shadows of mountain recesses in striking chiaroscuro.

Suddenly the train entered a tunnel, plunging everything in darkness. Nikita Alexeyevich involuntarily drew back from the iron door of the platform, and at the same moment he felt a pair of strong hands close about his throat from behind and pull him down.

His attacker was heavy and muscular; he panted loudly in the struggle, mauling and pressing Obozov's throat in mad haste. For a second Obozov lost consciousness; when he came to, he realized that with one hand the man was rummaging in his coat pocket while continuing to choke him with the other. Obozov grabbed the hand in his pocket and twisted it so strongly that he could hear the bones crack. The man groaned and jerked away, drawing Nikita Alexeyevich with him. They continued to battle in the darkness, hurling each other toward the grating at the steps. Their cries were drowned out by the roar of the wheels.

Evidently Obozov had injured the man's hand, for his attack became weaker. Suddenly the tunnel came to an end and the strong light of the moon struck their eyes. Obozov saw the pale, pupilless eyes with which he was familiar. Possessed by a fury which is deaf to its own cries, the eyes roll and one is oblivious to all but a fierce, wild, drunken rage, he lifted the body of his opponent and hurled it against the iron grating. He heard the young man's breath escape, saw his body turn over and strike the rocks below. Immediately caught up by sliding earth, it somersaulted like a sandbag over the cliff into the lake. Nikita Alexeyevich leaned over the grating to watch him, but a turn in the road cut off everything from view.

The train stopped at a way station. Obozov staggered into

the car. The door of his compartment was open and Ludmilla Stepanovna had gone. He sank heavily down onto the bed, placed his elbows on the table, took his face in his palms and remained motionless.

* * *

After a sleepless night, Obozov took a steamer leaving Bergen with a cargo of hides and paper. His face was yellow, his suit rumpled, his temples throbbing.

A strong wind blew from the sea. Down below he could see people splashing through the mud and snow of the shore and hear the creaking of draymen's carts. Sailors in stiff boots and leather hats laboured at grinding windlasses or rolled barrels up gangplanks while the wind tore at the edges of their quilted cotton jackets. Several women with children and nursemaids in tow stood shivering beside their smart luggage in the mud. A nimble Cook's agent, with a perpetual smile on his face, kept harassing an irritable gentleman in spectacles who was battling with the wind, the agent, a shortness of breath, and the mud splashed by passing automobiles. This rainy northern town located on the semicircular slope of the mountains was enveloped in grey clouds which caught onto the spires of the churches, the tips of the pines and the brown cliffs, and crawled north along the spine of the forest.

Out on deck or inside the steamer, the throbbing brain of Nikita Alexeyevich desired only one thing: to get going as soon as possible, to rock on the waves, to lie down and sleep without waking until they reached England.

At that moment an impressive-looking waiter and two lean, middle-aged women in starched caps and aprons entered the lounge, laid the table with a snow-white cloth, silver and crystal, with red lobsters, mounds of cheese and cuts of cold pork and beef.

A couple of dozen men were sitting smoking pipes and cigars and sipping drinks in the smoking lounge upstairs, the

windows of which were decorated with views of Norwegian resorts. Among them were Swedes, Danes, broad-shouldered Americans, Norwegians whose faces were wind burned from life in the mountains. All of them were wearing sturdy shoes and loose-fitting suits; all of them had excellent appetites, cheerful disposition, and imperturbable spiritual balance.

A bell was rung out on deck; the chains of the windlasses ground, barrels banged against each other, and short, sharp words of command were exchanged. A strong wind blew through the rigging. This was another world, fresh and courageous, and infinitely removed from all that had taken place on the train. It seemed shameful to recollect, to pry into one's feelings here. One wished to be as fresh and strong and clean as that wind.

The steamer left the harbour and headed southwest, breasting a heavy surf. The boat began to rock. Huge waves struck the port deck, darkening the portholes every minute with foaming green water. The cabin, along with the bed, curtains, and enameled washstand it contained veered creaking far to one side and scarce had time to right itself when the ship was struck by another wave.

Nikita Alexeyevich climbed to the upper deck. Like everyone else, he had had a hearty dinner accompanied by several glasses of wine. Roused by the heavy salt wind, the pungent Burgundy and the movement of the high prow of the steamer, he paced the wet deck with his collar up, sitting down or holding on to the railing whenever the ship took a particularly sharp lunge. He enjoyed the freedom of standing in the wind with the icy spray on his face. He was not disturbed by the fact that he had killed a man: he whom he had killed the day before had not been his personal enemy or rival; he had been an enemy of the army and the people and the guilt for his death lay on the shoulders of all. But in general he had no sense of guilt—only the satisfaction of having won, of having gotten the upper hand. The situation was entirely different in respect

to Ludmilla Stepanovna. Here he found succour in the wind and the majesty of the North Sea. He realized that he was vastly to blame, and suffered from repulsion and pity. Whenever he remembered the half-crazed, terrified woman caught in the net of her own lies, crouching in a corner of the divan with her thin shoulders hunched up, making soft, stifled sounds, Nikita Alexeyevich shook his head to rid himself of the vision and concentrated his gaze on the leaden waters of the ocean.

The troubled waves, foaming throughout their entire girth, hissed and strained and piled on top of each other like mountains. The wind snatched off and leveled out their white crests. The body of the steamer groaned with the effort of climbing this living mountain; its prow balanced momentarily over the abyss, then plunged into the watery valley while great masses of surf broke over the decks. And again wave piled upon wave, cutting off a view of the sky. Shreds of cloud flew low over the water as though digging it up, while from these clouds poured slanting streams of hail and icy rain. The cold grey sky, the harassed sea, the wind, and the involuntary sadness of the north-land oppressed the spirit.

"She will either poison herself or they will hang her," he thought. "She herself knows that she is doomed to a bad end. And how she yearned toward that solitary house! 'If I could only live here until spring. . . .' She didn't count on any more time . . . till spring."

The sun, which had not appeared all day, now glanced for a moment through the piles of clouds, flooding them with red light, illuminating the slanting streams of hail and the crests of the waves which had grown larger and seemingly more silent. Then it sank below the horizon. Lights appeared on the masts. The sea darkened and drew closer. Shivering with cold, Obozov went into the smoking lounge.

There he found only two Norwegians, flushed with the heat, who were playing dominoes, and the irritable man in spectacles who was drinking whisky with a bottle of soda held between

his knees. Obozov leafed through the magazines, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the irritable gentleman who was now battling with sea-sickness, then he yawned and went below.

In the corridor he was stopped by a chambermaid who whispered:

"There's a lady would like to see you. Please follow me."

"What lady? What nonsense is this?" he said, catching hold of a brass post. And suddenly he felt the rolling of the ship and the stuffiness and the dizziness which attacked him. "What lady, I ask you?"

But he immediately followed the smiling chambermaid, who opened the door of the end cabin. From the threshold he saw Ludmilla Stepanovna in a disheveled lace negligée lying on a sort of tiger-skin blanket. A hot water bottle was placed at her head, and one arm hung lifeless to the floor; only her eyes were alive, burning dry and eager in her pale face.

"I am suffering horribly," she said in a hoarse voice. "Sit at the foot of the bed. I wanted to see you once more. They'll arrest me when we get to England. But there is nothing I would ask of you. Pity me."

"I pity you," muttered Nikita Alexeyevich between his teeth from where he was sitting at her feet with his hat in his hands.

"I love you madly. I am losing my mind. I could not go on living this way. It is you who are all to blame—you—only you! If you only knew how I am suffering!"

She clutched her heart, then her throat, overcome by a deathly pallor. The attack passed, and once more her eyes burned.

"I agreed to steal the documents only in order to free myself of him. Yes, that is so." She raised her hand in a threatening gesture. "I hated him. He would have cut your throat in your sleep if it hadn't been for me. You know that without my telling you. You are pretending, you are lying. You love me. You won't leave me."

He was overcome by weakness. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. Nikita Alexeyevich rubbed behind his ear.

"But can't you understand, you strange woman!" he said. "I can't love you. Nothing can come of our relationship."

"Don't dare speak that way of love."

"It's disgusting for me to hear you use that word." He got up.

"My God! What darkness!" she cried, clutching his sleeve. "Why have you stopped loving me? Am I any worse than I was on Wednesday? No, I'm better. I have sacrificed everything, given up everything. I am yours—yours—yours!"

The lace negligée slipped off her bare shoulder. Her eyes rolled. Nikita Alexeyevich looked at her and his heart grew cold. She was too pitiful.

"Well, good-bye," he said, releasing his sleeve.

Then Ludmilla Stepanovna thrust her hand under the pillow and drew out a little revolver. It shook and twisted in her fingers. She raised it and began to take aim. From the doorway, Obozov shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Lift the safety catch."

Ludmilla Stepanovna threw down the revolver, and buried her head in the pillow. Obozov stood for a second, bent over the lady, carefully covered her feet with the tiger-skin blanket, and went out.

* * *

On the following morning the steamer drew up along the empty quay at Newcastle. From behind a large, fireproof barn appeared police officials who came on board to verify documents. Among the passengers, Obozov saw Ludmilla Stepanovna. Wrapped up in her winter coat and with a bewildered smile on her face, she was making for the gangplank. They stopped her, and for a long time one of the officials studied her pass-

port. From behind the barn appeared two imperturbable "Bobbies" who boarded the ship. Nikita Alexeyevich nudged the official, showed him his card, and, placing his hand on Ludmilla Stepanovna's muff, said:

"This lady is traveling with me. I shall answer for her."

That same day he escorted her to the trans-Atlantic liner *Abraham Lincoln*, sailing that night for New York. In parting, he said the only words he had spoken to her all day:

"I do not ask you to forgive me. Nor shall I ever forgive you. If you need money, let me know. I hope you'll be happy."

Ludmilla Stepanovna wept silently. He went down the gang-plank and, without looking back, was lost in the crowd.





UNDER WATER

I •

“YOU WERE RIGHT, my friend—I am only a seeker of adventures. I realized that just now, sitting in a tavern and writing this letter to you on the corner of a table wet with spilled gin. What a host of inscriptions, confessions and love and vows in all languages have been carved out on this table top! Tob, the belle of the port, as dark and ill-tempered as a monkey, is sitting opposite me. She is drinking her liqueur through a straw, and when she isn’t toying with the comb in her hair she is tugging at her blouse; her clothes are silken but stolen and hence rather a tight fit. She told me that if I leave her there will be the devil to pay.

“At dawn I shall put to sea on board a submarine which will bring up the rear of a column of underwater craft. The boat is the *Kate*. This means that at last I’ll get to the sea bottom, while you will continue your wanderings in other surroundings, only more illusory than mine.

“Do you remember our conversation a year ago in the suburban park outside Moscow? A cuckoo was calling and there was the fragrance of honey all around—it rose from the fields and the lindens and your gown. You said there were two breeds of people as distinct from one another as night and day in the eternal march of time; the first seek calm and tranquility, and the second, excitement. As you can see, I belong to the second breed.

“During the past year I have traveled halfway around the world. For three months now I have been stranded in this

port, spending my time in fist fights over Tob and outfitting the boat, and, on windy nights like this, staring at an empty gin bottle, I have begun desperately to long for adventure. . . .

"It is still many hours until dawn, but if the weather does not change we are in for a rough passage. Through the window I can see the entire water front covered with a multitude of puddles pockmarked by the rain. The lanterns are swinging in the wind which has torn the tarpaulin off a stack of bags. The mast lights bob up and down, and the siren laments like a deserted maiden. A drunken sailor in an oilskin cape is being driven down the street by the wind and the rain.

"Tob says that if she knew how to write she would let you know that I am a swine. Now she's tearing the pen from my hand."

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Lights doused and flying no signals, the submarines put out to sea. At three thirty sharp Andrei Nikolayevich climbed on the bridge and the sailors and his two lieutenants who had been up till then went below.

Ponderous clouds reflecting the harbour lights and already paling in the coming dawn were massed over the port and the sea. A driving rain beat against the windows and walls of the brick houses on shore, against the kerosene drums and the tarpaulins covering the piles of bags, lashed at the clms on the water-front square, drummed against the steel deck of the submarine and plastered the raincoat against Andrei Nikolayevich's back.

Close by, the tavern window glowed red through the curtain of rain. There, behind those panes, Tob was still leaning against the edge of the table, her pointed chin resting against hands compressed into fists.

Andrei Nikolayevich smiled happily and a thrill ran through his being: he had left another shore never to return.

There was no sweeter sensation in the world than that of parting and freedom.

He glanced at his watch and gave orders for full speed ahead. A tremor passed through the *Kate* from stem to stern, and the ship slipped through the water to meet the oncoming waves flecked with the reflections of the lights on shore and water-front refuse.

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The port lights, now pale and chill in the grey glimmer of dawn, dropped far behind, then dipped into the water and disappeared. The wind was fresh and the rollers came at an angle to meet the ship and broke over it.

Ragged clouds raced over the frothy ocean, and suddenly the sun appeared in a gash driven in them. Broad sunbeams shot up and to both sides, the sea grew green, and the wet steel of the bridge glistened.

Now the arched backs of the oncoming waves seemed transparent like glass. The *Kate* plunged into the rearing water and in a sweep was in the midst of the boiling crest, then pitched forward and slipped down into the trough beyond. For a moment the screw thrashed at empty air and a mountainous wave came down with a crash to starboard. Where the sky and water met, the radio masts of the submarine ahead bobbed up and down.

The clean-shaven face of Yakovlev, the first lieutenant, thrust up from below.

"Time, Andrei Nikolayevich," he said raising his eyebrows. "We're all anxious to know. What are the orders?"

He climbed up onto the bridge and lit a cigarette. Andrei Nikolayevich took the sextant readings, then unbuttoned his jacket and produced an envelope with five red seals and the latitude and longitude where the sealed orders were to be read written on top. He broke the seals and unfolded the thin sheet of paper inside in the shelter of his raincoat. The orders

were brief and incredible: to make for Hangö through the Skagerrak and the Sound.

There was a note of dejection in Yakovlev's voice:

"But, Andrei Nikolayevich, that means butting our heads against the wall!"

"That's not your business—nor mine."

Having turned over the watch, Andrei Nikolayevich descended the ladder into the narrow corridor lined with cabins. A row of opalescent hemispheres attached to the ceiling lit up the white steel walls, the strips of brass tubing, the rows of rivets, wires, trusses and the thick carpet on the floor.

Overhead there was a blast of warm, sweetish air heavily laden with the fumes of gasoline and lubrication oil. The ventilators hummed and the engine throbbed somewhere in the distance with the even rhythm of the human pulse.

The far end of the corridor, where the door leading to the engine room was, now heaved upwards, now dipped down. Bracing himself against the swaying bulkheads, Andrei Nikolayevich entered a cabin with three bunks one above the other. In the topmost, Belopolsky, the second lieutenant, whose waxen face bore the traces of an attack of fever from which he had barely recovered, was swinging as if in a cradle. On the other side of the bulging wall there was a swishing and gurgling of water. A blast of fresh air came up from below, stirring the corner of the map on the table and ruffling the hair of the sleeping man. The used-up air was sucked through a grating in the dome of the ceiling which was flooded by a strong electric light. An opened bottle of cognac stood on a neat collapsible table.

Whistling to himself, Andrei Nikolayevich sat at the table and laced his fingers around his knee. The order could be carried out, of course, but not without great risk. Running at periscope depth a submarine leaves a track that is visible through the daylight hours. If the boat submerges

deep enough to conceal the periscope, it will have to probe its way ahead blind, relying on the compass alone and taking the risk of running on rocks or shoals. The *Kate* did have an advantage over submarines of older types; she had special optical portholes forward that corrected the refraction of light in the water, and hence she was not blind even when submerged below periscope depth. It was on these that Andrei Nikolayevich relied as he reviewed the difficulties of the passage through straits held by the enemy fleet.

Kuritsyn, the lookout, a broad-faced, stocky sailor, entered the cabin to summon the captain to the wireless room. The message turned out to be a query whether the orders had been read. Andrei Nikolayevich replied in code:

"Orders received. Am proceeding accordingly."

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For two days and nights the *Kate* pitched and rolled as she sliced her way through the waves. She was a sturdy, fast boat, linked by wireless with the whole world, and the sight of her warmed Andrei Nikolayevich's heart. He could not visualize a prize like her destroyed by a collision with a mine or a bomb, and it seemed to him that the *Kate* herself had a loftier purpose than to sink other ships.

The crew took turns on deck for an airing, and the men drew eagerly on their cigarettes in the light breeze after the close air of the cabins and compartments. The weather was clear and schools of fish leapt on the crests of the waves as they fled before the oncoming ship.

Kuritsyn contrived to scoop up fish with a dip net on the go. While the rest of the sailors looked on shaking with laughter, he would turn up his trouser legs, work his way to the edge of the deck, dip in his net and dash back dancing like a gnome as the prow fell into the next trough.

Porpoises appeared and raced after the submarine. They would emerge from the green water under the nose of the

ship, shooting up with the momentum of their race and describing a graceful arc in the air before they disappeared once more without so much as a splash. The slippery, brown, white-bellied bodies rolled like so many wheels all around the ship.

During the day Andrei Nikolayevich's time was spent either sleeping or sitting at the wireless. Closing his eyes and leaning back in his chair, he would hear fragmentary reports on the fighting in Champagne or on the Western Dvina, on the Austrian frontier and the Dardanelles.

The whole world was now condensed into the dots and dashes and the crackle and hum of the wireless apparatus. The past, both the land and the people inhabiting it, receded into a dream; the future depended upon mines. There were no fears, or joys, or regrets left—the whole universe consisted now of water, this steel hull crammed with people like sardines in a tin can, and the dots and dashes of the wireless searing into the brain.

When the ship's bell summoned the men to supper, Andrei Nikolayevich mounted the bridge, relieved his lieutenant, pulled his cap over his eyes and was pleased to note that the two short masts were still bobbing up and down the same distance away, on the border line between the sky and the sea.

The sea was purple. Behind, the wake of the ship sparkled like crimson glass through the watery knolls, and the sunset colours flooded half the sky. The sun slipped like an enormous flat disc out of the incandescent clouds and slowly sank into the sea.

Then a faint glow like that cast by a burning ship appeared in the east, and an enormous orange moon came up. It faded and paled, shone with increasing brightness, and by the time it reached the stars there was a silvery trail shimmering on the water. These moments bore down heavily on Andrei Nikolayevich, whose calm confidence was now disturbed by the twitching of some impatient nerve. It was inconsequential

things like a sunset that made him realize that the ordeal was not over and that the biggest and most momentous was still ahead.

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Shortly after noon on the third day out, Andrei Nikolayevich emerged from the wireless compartment and issued orders to prepare to submerge. The crew took its stations at the compressors and inspected the oxygen tanks, ozonizers, air pumps and hatches. The torpedo crews stood by at their stations. The orders were to lie down as much as possible, reduce movement to the minimum, to refrain even from talking. Yakovlev, who was on duty, called down the voice tube that there was a smear of smoke to the north; then he too came down the ladder and the airtight hatch closed above him.

Entering the navigation compartment, Andrei Nikolayevich ordered the ship to submerge. The water hissed in the Kingston valves, the ship grew heavier, and the pitching and rolling lessened. The *Kate* sank deeper until she was running at periscope depth. Andrei Nikolayevich pressed a button, the lights went out, and a cone of bluish light fell from the periscope tube.

The surface of the periscope screen sprang into life. Tiny waves with frothy crests swept across it, clouds made their appearance, and the smear of smoke grew longer. Andrei Nikolayevich gazed intently at the sea laid out before him upon the surface of a square foot. The smoke disappeared, and soon a faint strip of coast appeared to starboard. He decided to surface for the night and proceed without lights.

All night he spent up on the bridge. The sea was calm, only now and then the rising swell plashed against the prow. A fine veil of mist was drawn over the stars and in the awesome distance southward the bluish finger of a searchlight ran over the clouds.

Andrei Nikolayevich's perceptions were keyed up to a

point when he could hear his watch tick in his pocket. Just before dawn a flock of geese whirred by in low-level flight. The news came that the leading submarine had submerged. Soon the next boat in line wirelessly reported that it had followed suit. The mine barrage was ahead, and one by one the craft slipped under it, perhaps never to emerge again.

Daybreak was a lingering one; its greenish and orange hues played on the feathery clouds. Finally Andrei Nikolayevich discerned the hazy outlines of bluffs towering over the milky surface of the bay; he ordered a full stop and descended into the boat, clamping the hatch down himself.

Precisely in the appointed spot the *Kate* descended deep under the water and proceeded slowly ahead under the mines guided only by log, compass and charts and squeezed by hundreds of thousands of tons of water.

The log line trailing behind the *Kate* indicated her speed, the chronometer showed the time to veer from her course, and the compass her exact direction. Yakovlev watched the indicators and Belopolsky sat over tables of figures correcting the speed and direction and issuing orders to the chief engineer at his post in the engine room. Bending over a chart, Andrei Nikolayevich issued commands to the helmsman: so many degrees, minutes and seconds to port, so many to starboard.

There was no pitching or rolling now, nor was the ship's movement perceptible. The sailors lay motionless. The air was heavy and dense, and there was a ringing in their ears. From time to time someone muttered: "O Lord!" and sighed heavily, evidently thinking of his three dessiatines of land somewhere near Buguruslan, the stand of buckwheat, the whinnying stallion and the wind sighing in the willows.

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"Stop! Stop!" Andrei Nikolayevich shouted, springing out from the navigation room. There was a noise as if the bottom

of the boat had scraped against some solid body. The hull groaned and developed a list. "Stop!"

Gears whined and the engines stopped. Men were breathing heavily in the darkness. It was suddenly as hot as in a Turkish bath.

Andrei Nikolayevich made his way to the air lock where the greenish sickly light penetrated through the portholes, and pressed his face against the glass.

In the underseas twilight he made out shadows and vague, hazy shapes. One of the shadows started, then skipped along the outer surface of the glass. Round fish eyes stared at Andrei Nikolayevich.

The fish slipped across and down into the depths. That meant that the *Kate* had not run on a shoal, and there hardly could have been reefs in these waters. Andrei Nikolayevich ordered to raise the ship a few feet. A multitude of shadows stirred and the floating ends of torn shrouds and ropes and the half-devoured remnants of a human being dangling in them came clearly into sight. The dead man's arms were outstretched and he swayed back and forth head downward. Andrei Nikolayevich shrank from the sight and there was a ringing in his brain. The *Kate* had run into the remains of a sunken ship.

The stop might prove to be fatal. The even progress of the submarine had been disrupted and direction lost. In a flash the *Kate* had lost all conception of time.

Andrei Nikolayevich's fingers drummed against the glass of the porthole. It was impossible to remain under water, and to surface meant disclosing the ship's location and drawing fire. And yet the latter alternative was the only way to establish the ship's bearings. Ordering the ship to be brought up slowly, he turned back to the porthole. The shadows slipped down. The water grew appreciably lighter. Then, suddenly, a dark sphere began to descend on the submarine. "Mine.... We can't miss it," Andrei Nikolayevich thought. but fighting

the numbness coming over his brain he shouted: "Port helm, hard a-port!" The sphere receded, but another appeared on the left. The ship moved forward at even keel, but in the greenish half-gloom ahead there loomed other spheres waiting for the steel hull to collide with them. The *Kate* had lost its way in the mine barrage.

II

Sea water is transparent to a considerable depth when you look at it from high above, and it transpired that the *Kate* had been sighted by an enemy seaplane as she was trying to break through to the surface between the mines. The plane spotted the ship's shadow and, circling overhead, wirelessly the patrol boats. But after describing a complete circle, the submarine again disappeared into the lower depths.

Now the boat was making its way ahead completely blind. The engines were running at full speed; hundreds of demons termed horsepower strained within them, furiously turning crankshafts and spinning gears. The hull shuddered. Half-naked mechanics crept around the engines, scorching themselves against the red-hot, singing parts of the motors. It was hot and stuffy, and in the leaden tanks there was oxygen for an hour and no more.

Yakovlev was still at his post by the navigation instruments, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasping his head as the world turned black in his eyes. In the torpedo compartments, the cabins and corridors sailors lay against bulkheads or stood about in silence, gasping for breath. Drawn like so many cork floats to the surface, they wanted to spring on deck, greedily inhale the breeze and look at the open sky. Belopolsky, still bent over his now useless tables, wiped his face every now and then as if brushing off cobwebs; at length he tried to rise to his feet, but fell down on his hands and knees instead and was sick. He was carried off unconscious.

Andrei Nikolayevich carried on by dint of sheer nervous energy, and his voice rang in all parts of the ship. "Another half an hour, just a half an hour," he repeated over and over again. Having sent the submarine driving ahead at full speed, he counted on passing the barrage. If only the oxygen would last. . . .

At last he sat down near an engine; red circles flashed before his eyes and the back of his head struck against something hard. "Steady, steady," flashed through his subconscious mind, and he crawled over to an oxygen tank, opened the cock with effort and inhaled the fragrant jet of gas. His head swam and a sweet fire filled his lungs. Andrei Nikolayevich rose unsteadily to his feet. He could see everything clearly now, the faces turned to him, and the beseeching eyes. The haggard unshaven young faces of the sailors touched him more than usual. . . . There's no way out but to die, is there? Whether you like it or not. . . .

In the passage he stumbled into Kuritsyn leaning against the wall and gulping like a fish. The veins stood out on his forehead and his pock-marked face was turning blue.

"Got a bit dizzy," he croaked.

When bending close to the sailor, Andrei Nikolayevich saw the pall of death drawing over his eyes, he suddenly spun around and ordered the boat to surface. It took the *Kate* four and a half minutes to come up, but it was like so many years spent in tense anticipation of the collision, the explosion, the ripping of the hull, the fire, and death. Then the *Kate* came to a standstill. Light streamed on the periscope screen. Sailors crawled on all fours to the hatchway, unscrewed the clamps, and the cold salty air poured in, tearing at their lungs and making their heads swim. The ventilators and pumps went into action.

Andrei Nikolayevich leapt on the bridge, cried out, and instinctively shut his eyes. The evening sun hung low over mountains of warm clouds that were rising like smoke. There

was no wind and no swell, and the water was as smooth as a mirror.

Holding the sextant with trembling hands, Andrei Nikolaevich began taking the bearings. Behind his back appeared Yakovlev and some sailors. There was a powerful roaring in the sky and somewhere overhead a machine gun sprang into action. The hull rang as if pelted with peas. A seaplane with sharp-pointed wings was circling overhead.

Watching it from the corner of his eye, Andrei Nikolayevich continued making his observations. The sailors clicked the bolts of their carbines. The seaplane had almost touched water and was now zooming, flashing by over the submarine with an angry whine. You could see the pilot sitting stiffly at the controls. Below him the black-moustached observer, his small head encased in a helmet, bent forward in expectant waiting. Then he threw himself back in his seat, picked up a bomb with both hands and dropped it in the tube between his feet. A moment later the missile hit the water next to the ship. Kuritsyn fired and the moustached face grimaced and the leathery hands with fingers outspread were flung up. Then the plane had gone and was circling to gain altitude. The sailors opened fire after it.

"He's wounded!" Yakovlev shouted.

A second plane appeared in the distance over the ridge of reddish hills. The *Kate* raced on over glass-smooth, milky, orange-flecked water.

Andrei Nikolayevich pushed his cap back and pacing the bridge, the ruddy reflection of the sunset on his cheeks and in his eyes, said.

"Well, Yakovlev, now that we are past the mines what are we going to do?"

"There are reefs and shallows in these waters, Andrei Nikolayevich."

"That's exactly the point. Just because of the reefs and shoals I can't risk running under water. . . . Now what's this?" and he raised his hand.

The sun set in the clouds, and saturated by its light they cast their glow over the waters. From the ruddy effulgence a sickening whine came down upon the ship.

"Give her more speed!" Andrei Nikolayevich turned his binoculars on the sunset.

The next shell straddled the submarine, raising a geyser of water. The *Kate* veered sharply toward the darkening line of hills. Behind, a third shell exploded in her lilac wake.

The *Kate* was about to swing eastward again, but now there were shells exploding ahead of her, abreast, everywhere, and finally smears of smoke appeared all along the dimming horizon. They were closing in on the submarine.

An observation plane swept like a shadow over the *Kate* and for a moment two pale faces peered down at her and then vanished.

The next moment a flame burst out low over the stern, and Shubin, the black-bearded gunner, dropped his carbine and rolling over the railing slipped into the water.

"All hands below!" shouted Andrei Nikolayevich and still holding the megaphone to his lips he watched from the corner of his eye where the shells came down the thickest.

The *Kate* darted about like a beast at bay. The funnels of destroyers were now belching smoke everywhere, and the ring was drawing tighter around the submarine. Suddenly a shell scored a hit; there was a scorching blast and Andrei Nikolayevich was knocked clean off his feet. The radio mast collapsed into the sea.

In the meantime the *Kate*, now submerged to her conning tower, raced toward the craggy coast.

Six bright sparks flashed one after the other in the twilight under the bluffs, the detonations rolled over the water and six demons sealed in the cylinders of steel whistled low over the submarine. The long shadow of a ship was slithering along parallel to the coastal cliffs.

The *Kate* was shaken by a tremor as she coursed ahead and

a projectile slipped out of an underwater torpedo tube and churned its way toward the shadow. After what seemed like a long time a shaggy mountain of fire and water reared up where the funnels of the destroyer had been. Then it came crashing down and there was no shadow left. The *Kate* slipped between the crags into a deep inlet, submerged and came to rest on the sandy bottom.

III

"I know that we are believed lost. We are lying at the sea bottom five fathoms down, and taking every precaution we come up every night for air. The radio is beyond repair. And in any case we could not afford to waste fuel to generate electricity for the wireless. Our food is also running low. Nevertheless we are holding out. The distillation units are working excellently."

Thus wrote Andrei Nikolayevich on the margins of the ship's log a week after the battle.

"We got away with only one casualty (Shubin was killed) and the loss of the mast. We sank a destroyer and took cover in the fiord—disappeared like a needle in a haystack. The enemy fears to come too close but is nevertheless on his guard: he does not think we have perished, as I had hoped at first.

"Here in the silence of the sea bottom the recent events have receded into the distant past. We are neither alive nor dead. We sleep all day long. No one talks—the men only mumble and sigh in their sleep.

"Belopolsky is in a bad way. Since he fainted he has been unable to recover. I ordered him to keep to his bed, and days on end he lies in his bunk with his face to the wall. The utter absence of sounds oppresses him.

"The silence is terrible indeed. We are lying under a layer of water the height of a four-storey house.

"Only when it is time to surface, everybody comes to life and anxiously watches the clock—they wait for the moment as

if it were their hour of resurrection. Now the fresh air is coming in through the ventilators and it is pleasant to tap the ship's side and know that only an inch of steel separates you from the open sky. Yesterday there were shots fired from the distance—they're on the lookout for us.

"As soon as we renew our stock of air and settle down at sea bottom again, the same somnolence descends over the men again. Time comes to a standstill. You throw yourself on your bed. The darkness here is not the same as on land—this is a velvety black, perfect darkness. . . . Yakovlev mumbles and cries out. He dreams of battles, flag-bedecked ports and women. Half asleep, he bends down from his bunk and recounts all that nonsense.

"I am beginning to understand the flies you see drowning between frost-crusted windows. I lie down with my eyes open, but I am neither asleep nor awake, I neither think of the future nor recall the past—I only feel, more strongly than ever, that I exist. Existence does not present itself to me in the shape of past events or isolated occurrences; instead, it extends infinite and out of time somewhere above me, beyond the water. I could not define it more precisely. Every now and then my heartbeat quickens as if in anticipation of a clearer understanding. It is strange and awesome, and perhaps a pity that I don't just dream like Yakovlev."

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"Belopolsky is sinking fast. Today is the eleventh day of his illness and he became delirious and fell out of his bunk. We made him a bed in the lower one.

"Kuritsyn feeds him on the quiet. I pretend not to notice it. We have barely enough rations left to subsist on for a week. The sailors are emaciated; most of them seem to feel as I do—like flies behind a storm window. Everybody is very sorry for Belopolsky. The senior torpedo gunner says he should be given sage tea. It's a pity we have no sage; they say the herb is an

excellent remedy. There are wondrous herbs growing up on land.

"Belopolsky is talking in his delirium about some Tanyechka, imagining that he is riding a swing with her over a river and that the river is making him nauseous. 'I wouldn't care if it were shallow, but it's not—let's go away from the river.' Then he stops and rests for a while only to go through it all again. Finally two queer persons with wooden arms appeared to him in his fevered imagination.

"He grappled with them until evening, complaining that he had slivers under his fingernails. Finally he made gurgling sounds and tossed on his bed, and then grew quiet.

"Yakovlev, utterly exhausted, dozed off. A deadly unutterable sadness surged over me. By the time I got down to see why Belopolsky was so still, he had already grown cold.

"At midnight on the thirtieth day we surfaced, taking every precaution. The body was wrapped in a sheet and a shell attached to the feet. The crew sang a funeral dirge.

"The first thing I saw as I climbed to the bridge was the stars. Their enormous, innumerable orbs shone down from the sky and pulsated in the waters of the bay. To the right loomed the steep bluffs, rearing their jagged fringe of crags and dwarf trees high against the sky. The fragrance of wormwood and flowers was wafted from the shore.

"As Belopolsky was lifted up through the hatch I could see his sharp profile from under the shroud. Then the body slipped down the ship's side and vanished into the water without a splash.

"I cannot see where is the border line between life and death. Perhaps where pain ends and peace begins.

"Outside the entrance into the bay the shape of a four-funneled ship slipped by. 'They' were still on the lookout for us. From somewhere beyond the waters the beam of a searchlight sprang into being and threw the scraggy branches, boulders and fissures of the cliffside into bold relief. Then it flashed up into

the sky only to fall down again and begin probing the surface of the bay. Birds chattered. The surface of the water blazed under the creeping beam. Then the searchlight stopped a few fathoms from where we were, and was still. We too froze.

"Somewhere about a verst away the man behind the searchlight grew weary of his labours; had he turned the reflector a hairsbreadth farther to the left we would have been exposed.

"The bluish light lit up the water and a school of fish under its surface. There was so much fish there that Kuritsyn could not suppress a cry. A bat dashed by in blind flight and swarms of midges and moths filled the beam.

"The searchlight beam wavered for a moment and then sprang to the crest of the crag; the jagged parapet was lit up and from the blinding light came the complaint of an angry eagle. Once more we were plunged into darkness and non-existence."

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"'Belopolsky is dead!' I have been repeating these words over and over again unable to grasp their meaning. To die over there, on land, means that you cease to see, to hear and to feel. 'He has left us,' people say. Hence, to die is to be left alone, to be plunged into complete solitude. That is the very sensation I am experiencing sealed into this steel cask lying at the sea bottom. I lie motionless in the dark, immersed in deadly silence, hemmed in on all sides by water. If I were to grow cold and cease to move, would my condition alter much? Hardly at all.

"Food is repulsive to me. Only with great effort can I compel myself to swallow a few spoonfuls of soup. I drag myself to the sailors' quarters to make sure that they all show up at the table and eat something. I have found out that hunger is painful only at first; then the critical point comes when the body begins to wilt. This sensation of physical extinction is an ex-

ceedingly curious one. There are the inexplicable moments when a slight chill sends its tremors through your frame, then the clammy cold permeates your body and you finally cease to be conscious of it. The sensations of freedom and wistful longing arise in your tense consciousness. Indeed the entire universe and its herbs and stars are within me, and I have become at one with it. I am bound by nothing. And yet I am burdened by the oppressive sense of not having performed my last, supreme duty. I feel that had I done that duty my spirit would not cringe before this chill, but perceive something new—something perhaps not closer to perfection but nevertheless simpler and more earthly and finer. But what is the duty I am to perform? And what am I to perceive?

"I told Yakovlev about this. He said nothing and only wept. Now he spends all his time lying with his face to the wall, and he no longer recounts his dreams. . . ."

Andrei Nikolayevich now filled the pages of his journal with disjointed meditations of this kind. Nothing happened worth mentioning. Up above, the patrol boats continued to watch the coast line, lighting up the shore with their searchlights at night.

The supply of tinned food dwindled and finally gave out. The emergency rations, sufficient for a day, remained, but that was to be touched only when the ship itself was in imminent danger. Andrei Nikolayevich had estimated that six members of the crew left alive could man the ship and take a chance at being able to break out of the trap, and in case of failure to escape, to blow up the *Kate*. But as long as nearly all the members of the crew were alive it was necessary to lie down and wait.

"Four are already down with scurvy, and the fifth is dying," Andrei Nikolayevich entered in his journal, "but none has yet reproached me for prizing the submarine more than human life.

Indeed, men die for the flag, a piece of silk fastened to a pole, and like the flag the *Kate* is only the symbol, a grim reminder of the fact that even in moments of the greatest depression man must not consider himself released from his duty.

"It is painfully difficult to reconcile *oneself* with them, the men. I want to be free, not duty-bound, but *they* demand that I give *them* their due. I want to live, yet they need my death. But if I give up the struggle, I shall be giving myself to them entirely and shall at once become as useless as a corpse; if I refuse to do my duty, I shall be closing my eyes and withdrawing into utter solitude—and that too is death....

"Kuritsyn has a simpler solution for all these problems: 'If you have to, you have to, and that's all there is to it.' A moment ago he came to me wearing only a pair of trousers with the legs rolled up above the knees, fishing lines with hooks rolled around his head and a net on his back, and said: 'If you will allow me, I'd like to go and try my luck with the fish.' Let him try; if he succeeds we'll be able to hold out another day.

"At dawn we came up again. There was a thick fog probed and fingered by the beams of searchlights. Kuritsyn slipped into the water without a sound and swam away through the milky, steaming water. In a minute he vanished from sight. I had promised him to surface the next morning at the same time.

"All day long I have been wondering what I should want most if I were to remain alive. Travel again? Adventures? How trivial everything is! I must have aged by years in the course of these days under water. I want nothing and yet never have I longed to be back there, on land, so strongly as now....

"Peering into the fog, I suddenly heard a splash and then saw Kuritsyn's wet head appear over the ship's side. On his back he had the net full of fish. After wiping his face, he said: 'I could do with some cognac.' Hardly had he made his

way below and tossed off a glass of the liquor than he threw himself down and fell asleep. The netful of fish was hauled on deck; there was enough there to eat for three days.

"Later we learned that Kuritsyn had simply made his way through the brush and the junipers on the shore during the day and cleaned out fishermen's nets. The next day he promised to go out in search of a lamb. His face, back and hands were fleshless, so much so that his ribs protruded like those of a carcase of a horse, but for all that he was highly pleased with himself. He asked for another glass of cognac and returned to recounting his adventures to the crew; toward the end of the story his tale was so exaggerated that the chief engineer spat in disgust.

"I am terribly moved by the Kuritsyn incident. For some reason I feel a deep sense of guilt. During the time we have spent at the sea bottom Belopolsky has died, Yakovlev is suffering agonies, and the sailors are simply fading away. Yet here am I *moralizing* about human virtues, duty and death. All this is so utterly wrong.

"No, one cannot reconcile oneself to solitude. Solitude is the deadliest of all sins. It is far more important to venture out after fish than to ponder the problem of death in darkness. To hell with it!

"I shall write no more.

"We are surfacing again. I can hear the dull reverberations of heavy gunfire. There is a battle going on the seas."

IV

The diary broke off here. Andrei Nikolayevich had no opportunity to write any more, for the events now hurtled on at breakneck speed and he himself, emerging from the spiritual catacombs, felt like a bull let loose in the arena.

The *Kate* came up into a swirling milky fog. The coast

trembled from the thunder and roar of battle. Smashing broadsides and explosions alternated with one another in rapid succession. It was as if the demons of the sea had been unleashed and were now coughing and bellowing at each other in a pandemonium of noise. A stunned sea gull shot over the *Kate*.

"Quick, Andrei Nikolayevich, we can make a dash for it now!" Yakovlev kept repeating as he held to the railing, his teeth chattering.

Preparations were soon completed. In the meantime a strong wind stirred the fog and drove it along in ragged tufts, exposing a wet, rocky promontory. The swollen face of Kuritsyn looked out from the hatchway.

"Ready!" he shouted so hard that the veins stood out at his temples, but his voice was barely audible.

Andrei Nikolayevich waved his hand, and the *Kate* dashed from the bay into the open sea with her engines running at full speed. The firing was behind and to the right of her, and the way to Hangö was clear.

Everything that Andrei Nikolayevich and the crew had experienced in the course of the two weeks they had spent at the sea bottom—desperation, stupefaction, awareness of the imminence of death, resignation—was now transmuted into sheer will power, and now they were not content even with the submarine's top speed as it sliced the foggy waters into twin waves.

To break through and bring the *Kate* into port safe and sound, to perform one's duty and nothing more, was now not enough. Will demanded something *tangible*. So does the bull that stands his ground in the middle of the ring; breathes hard, and then suddenly hurls himself against the horseman in order to gore him.

Andrei Nikolayevich still hesitated; but now it was not courage that impelled him, nor cool calculation, nor yet the element of adventure; the motive force was *eagerness* and that

alone. The ships, the men, the land, the enormous copper sun that looked through the yellow fog were all his own, palpable and desired. And the destruction the soul craved for did not seem like destruction. It was necessary to endow this glorious, terrible life with a furious vital force. Only the will to do so, the desire, the eagerness, the longing to *feel* everything, reigned supreme.

The sun climbed and visibility improved, but under the blanket of fog the orange water still stirred barely perceptibly. Somewhere nearby, to the left, invisible ships were pursuing one another and thundering with gunfire. The wind grew stronger. Suddenly a huge grey hulk showed through the clouds and smoke; it was obscured again, its guns thundered. and then the contours of turrets, funnels and masts, the entire profile of the ship with a black-eagle flag flying over it, grew clearly visible.

Seeing that it *could* be done, Andrei Nikolayevich could not restrain himself any longer. Breathless with excitement, he dashed down the hatchway, knocking Yakovlev off his feet as he went, and began loading the torpedo tubes himself. The *Kate* submerged and was now proceeding at periscope depth to intercept the quarry.

The shadow of the enemy ship rocked on the periscope screen. At regular intervals a cloud belched forth from it studded with the needle points of the blazing guns. The *Kate* released a torpedo, but the projectile passed behind the enemy's stern. Bending forward tensely, biting his lips until they bled, Andrei Nikolayevich peered at this tiny shadow ship whose shells rammed themselves against the hulls of enemy vessels with the impact of thirty million poods. The *Kate* was now closing in on it and its reflection had spread over half the dimensions of the screen when it suddenly veered.

"Another torpedo!" Andrei Nikolayevich shouted.

Just then the *Kate* staggered under the impact of a blow, there was a crunching noise and the glowing mirror on the

table went out. Leaping out of the navigation compartment, Andrei Nikolayevich shouted:

"The periscope's damaged! Full speed ahead!"

The engineer, his hands on the control levers, asked without turning around:

"Where to?"

"Straight ahead to hell!"

Yakovlev squatted next to the torpedo tubes; spitting blood, he shouted something. Andrei Nikolayevich pressed his face against the glass of a forward porthole.

Frothy currents swirled outside the glass. Then the light was intercepted by the black bottom of a ship no more than ten fathoms away. "Stop!" Andrei Nikolayevich commanded. "Release the second torpedo. Full speed in reverse!" He closed his eyes. This was the end. What a pity one had to be trapped like this when there was so much more to be done.

... Andrei Nikolayevich was thrown into the corridor, tossed up into the air, hurled against a bulkhead and then sucked down. The cries of the men and the groaning of the hull was drowned in the crash of falling water. The lights went out. The *Kate* spun crazily and went down.

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By the force of the explosion and the waves it sent surging in all directions, the *Kate* was swept far away from the sinking ship and sucked down to a great depth. The hull plates had parted and water leaked through the stuffing box of the smashed periscope. The motors had stopped. In general the boat looked more like a pontoon whose dark interior was filled with the groans and hoarse breathing of stunned, lacerated men. It did not stay under water long: relieved of the weight of two torpedoes it slowly rose, but just below the surface the ascent stopped and the ship imperceptibly began to sink as the water seeped in through the cracks.

The first to recover consciousness was Kuritsyn, who had

fallen on the carpet in the empty corridor; he raised himself cautiously on all fours, cocked his ears and crawled toward the engine room where by striking matches he found the mechanic and commenced to rub his ears.

When that did not help, he hauled over the oxygen tank and opened the tap right in his face.

The first thing the mechanic did was to grab his broken knee.

"We're sinking," Kuritsyn whispered, his lips close to the mechanic's face. "Think you could fix the engine?"

"I can only try."

Kuritsyn lighted a candle and released the oxygen from all the tanks. The invigorating gas which was like the air after a storm revived the sailors; some began crawling through hatches clutching their heads as they went, others made fruitless efforts to rise.

Andrei Nikolayevich was found in a narrow passageway. They dragged him out with difficulty and, failing to bring him around, carried him to his bunk.

They worked for a while over Yakovlev but finally gave up and covered him and two gunners with coats. Kuritsyn sent every man able to stand on his feet to the hand pumps. Until the engine was repaired this was the only means of fighting the water that was pouring in through the cracks. The mechanic and two assistants worked on the engine and the others listened dejectedly to the clank of their spanners on the metal.

The *Kate* was not deep below the surface but the men had no idea where she was since the periscope and pressure gauge were smashed. To find out by opening the hatch was too dangerous—the water might rush in.

At last the mechanic announced that he could get the engine going provided the candles would last. Kuritsyn cursed the mechanic, the candle manufacturers and engines and their inventors. Then he turned on the crew manning the pumps

and ordered them to raise the boat at least two feet if it killed them. The sailors worked in grim silence. The mechanic spat, swore and threw down the spanner. Someone said: "It's no use, fellows!" and the pumps stopped.

The only sound now was the monotonous deadly splashing of the water as it dripped on to the periscope table.

"Two of you follow me," Kuritsyn croaked. "We're going to open the hatch. Anything is better than this suspense."

Two or perhaps three sailors groped after him, climbed up the vertical ladder to the hatchway and seized the release clips. "Some fix we're in," somebody said "Shut up and do your job!" Kuritsyn snapped back. Someone else sighed: "There's a lot of water above us and it's going to swamp us!"

Just then knocking and footsteps were heard overhead. No doubt about it: there were people there. Kuritsyn spoke fast:

"Man the Kingston valves! When you hear a shot open them!"

Then, revolver between his teeth, he applied himself to the clips. The hatch swung ajar and a dazzling light and air rushed in through the slit.

"Hey, who goes there?" Kuritsyn shouted. "Friend or foe?"

"Friend, friend!"

"Oh, my God!"

.
A blinding cascade of sparks flashed before Andrei Nikolayevich's eyes when he hit his head against the steel bulkhead. Then everything went dark and silent. Only one little spark remained and now it gradually grew into a steady flood of light.

The light was even and a bit bluish. Andrei Nikolayevich looked at it for a long time.

A sense of uneasiness pervaded him for there was something alien in that light. It would have been so good if that unknown

something had vanished and dissolved, but it did not do so; instead it weighed heavy like a stone.

The light did not grow less intense, but it no longer gave him the joy it had at first; the alien something interfered and he had to strain his perceptions in order to fathom out what it was. Then came the moment when with mixed feelings of surprise and sadness he realized that the extraneous element was himself. Now the light was transformed into an ordinary bluish light bulb over the cot, and Andrei Nikolayevich's body began to ache in many spots. Becoming aware of the sharp pitching and rolling of the destroyer and the pounding of its engines, he tried to turn in his bed, but with a groan he was immersed in the living oblivion of sleep.

This was the beginning of Andrei Nikolayevich's slow return to life.

The *Kate* had been taken in tow by the destroyer. Down in the crew's quarters Kuritsyn, balancing a glass cautiously in his hands, told the sailors crowding around him in open-mouthed amazement about the battles and exploits he had taken part in. He tried not to boast, but he could not help himself—the rum was too strong, and then the commander of the destroyer, Gromoboyev, had only recently slapped him on the back and after invoking all the demons and the forebears of both himself and Kuritsyn wound up with the most important: "Well done, my lad! I'm going to recommend you for a decoration!"

.

From the vantage point of the stretchers swaying on the sailors' shoulders, Andrei Nikolayevich stared at the moist blue sky, the tile roofs of the cottages, and the curly crowned trees lining the neat street.

A large crowd pressed around the nine stretchers. The faces peering at them were all reassuringly quieting, even kind, it seemed. Someone looked into Andrei Nikolayevich's eyes and said as if pleasantly surprised: "He's alive..." The voices

rustled like leaves in the wind. A white carnation fell on Andrei Nikolayevich's chest. He closed his eyes, exhausted by the warm, sandy fragrance of land. "Gangway, gangway!" the sailors shouted.

As he was carried around a bend in the street climbing up the hillside, he opened his eyes, and overcoming the pain under his bandages, his lips framed a smile. In the oval bay of a hue darker than the sky lay warships at anchor, and next to the quayside he could see the stump of the *Kate's* mast and her shattered bridge. The day was azure blue and crystalline. This was the good old earth.

Andrei Nikolayevich was placed in a hospital room with a high window concealed behind a drawn white curtain. It allowed a milky light to pass through and billowed in the breeze. The quiet of the street was only occasionally broken by a passing carriage or the leisurely footsteps of a passer-by.

In the distant harbour ship's bells clanged and signalers sounded bugle calls.

Awakening, Andrei Nikolayevich heard the sounds, the distant voices, the whispering of the leaves and a plaintive waltz played by a barrel organ. He looked at the soft curtain and without thought or emotion savoured the blissful calm...

He dreamed a great deal, now it was the estate with its ponds and sunflowers, now the windmills standing on knolls, now the watchman's hut surrounded by yellow, ripe melons. When awakened, he drank his broth and dozed off again to the accompaniment of the soft sounds and whisperings.

Finally the dreams grew into reminiscences not of the recent past but of long-forgotten minor incidents that now acquired new purport. And the reminiscences, like the dreams, were impregnated with the bluish light that made everything soft and mellow.

At length he was permitted to sit up in bed, and the curtain was opened for the first time. On the opposite side of the street he saw two poplars, and between them a one-storey house

with a blue sign that read "Tobacconist." In the doorway stood a Finn in a brown waistcoat smoking a pipe. A freckle-faced little girl went by eating an apple—a sour one evidently.

Andrei Nikolayevich called out to her, and still chewing the apple she leaned on the window sill, opening her mouth and eyes and raising her light eyebrows. He asked her to run to the store and buy him some writing paper and an envelope.

"Dear, good Tatyana Alexandrovna," he wrote the next day. "I am now arriving at the realization that I have been on a voyage around the world and have once more returned to you. I realize that although I have not thought of you all this time, you were with me just the same, at the sea bottom, and during the battle, and in my last moment of despair; I sensed you in the sunrise, and in the sunset, and in the frolic of the porpoises from wave to wave. In my anguish and yearning for what I had cherished and lost, you (or rather that which sprang up between us in the linden avenue and from which in my ignorance I foolishly fled in search of adventure) you showed me, the only way—to probe my own soul, to measure the deadly, ghostly emptiness of solitude and to break away from my former self forever; so long as I am alone, I do not exist, I am a dim, blind, bloodless ghost! Dear friend, only now I am beginning to live, and already my heart is full of inexpressible emotion—the meaning of which I do not yet know. I have you to thank for everything."

1916





THE MAN IN PINCE-NEZ

EARLY in the spring, two of the cottages of a small resort straggling along the shore of the sea were taken possession of almost simultaneously.

To the wooden house with a tower (known in those parts as "The Castle,") came a cart loaded with huge baskets. A thin, morose man with a blond beard, wearing a raincoat and a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes, got out and climbed the porch steps where he stood waiting for someone to open the door. He frowned and adjusted his pince-nez as he glanced at the cold sea and the shreds of cloud skimming the grey waters. The wind inflated his raincoat and caused the bare branches of the poplars to wail like whips.

Then he entered the damp, unheated cottage, glanced at a couple of pictures showing rocks and boats and at an old calendar gone yellow on the 23rd of August, and without taking off his hat sank down on an ottoman which emitted a cloud of dust.

Presently he said, "Make a fire."

The keeper, a Tatar who had just dumped the last basketful of books in the dining room, answered "All right" and went away. The man remained alone. Drawing one leg up under him, he lighted a cigarette and sat gazing at the bare trees blowing in the wind beyond the dusty window. The sea was out of sight, but its dull roar filled the house. Twilight descended. The cigarette between his listless fingers went out, and the man gave a cold, muffled yawn that made his teeth chatter.

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Some three hours earlier, the neighbouring one-storeyed cottage had been taken over by a young woman accompanied by a child's nurse and two little girls in blue sheepskin jackets. For three hours the cottage was all hustle and bustle. Now the lights were burning, the children's beds were made, and milk was being boiled in the dining room. To the warm nursery came an old brown dog which extended its paw and gave a one-sided smile in indication of its unselfish devotion to the new arrivals. The young woman, her head and shoulders wrapped in an Orenburg shawl, had taken a seat on a little porch sheltered from the wind. Between two pillars she caught a glimpse of the sea far down below, and it was as novel and unfamiliar and expressive as the theatre. The woman was sure that on the morrow and on many, many days thereafter she would watch that sea, sometimes in bad weather and sometimes on warm days when all the surroundings would glow with life and colour and the waters would be transformed from lead-grey to azure.

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The gentleman who had just arrived was named Nikolai Ivanovich Stabesov. He was a Moscow bachelor with a sizable income, and had taught an elective course at the University. The revolution of 1905; a brief exile; then the anxious, shameless, wanton ten years when, in the intoxication of luxury and sin, the world was preparing its explosion of hate, and finally the war itself, had completely undermined the health of Nikolai Ivanovich. He had suddenly felt utterly alone, lost, and unwanted, and as though a sturdy army boot reeking of dubbin pitch were poised threateningly above his head. Nikolai Ivanovich could no longer sleep, work, or see his friends, and so the doctors sent him to the Crimea.

The woman in the neighbouring cottage, Yekaterina Vasilievna Bolotova, had come to the Crimea for the sake of her younger daughter, whom the doctors found to be suffering from rickets. Madame Bolotova feared and disliked doctors, but she

had brought her children to the Crimea notwithstanding, and all along the way had meditated happily upon this latest change in her life. Her husband had died several years before. A certain sadness lingered after this loss, but life did not seem barren and hopeless. Her husband had never roused in her an impassioned love, and the separation had caused her no great sorrow. Besides which she had youth, her children, a little money, a little freedom, and the happy faculty of always dreaming about the beautiful and the unknown, about the sea, the green fields, the warmth of summer when the bees hum and the earth is lavish. . . .

These two people who had become neighbours on this lonely seashore were destined to meet. And it would hardly be expected that their meeting in such an isolated spot would make as little impression as the passing of two people on the streets of that great city where it seems Stabesov and Yekaterina Vasilievna had once made each other's acquaintance and had spoken to each other (though when and about what, neither of them had the faintest recollection).

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A gravel path ending in a flight of steps led from the porch straight down to the sea. Here Nikolai Ivanovich would sit facing the sea with a book, with his hat and pince-nez pulled down on his nose. When the wind became more boisterous and the waves breaking against the rocks of the shore showered the high embankment with sea spray, he would move up the steps. And the stronger the wind blew, the louder and more alarming the echo from the rocks resounded, the higher the spray flew, the more definite became the mood of Nikolai Ivanovich—a mood which he expressed in words muttered through clenched teeth: "Go ahead and blow, my dear. You and I are both 'natural phenomena.'"

Then, chilled to the bone, Nikolai Ivanovich would go home, throw himself on the divan, light a cigarette, take up a

book, glance at the title, read the concluding lines of the last page, mutter something like "Hm, so you're sure of it? I envy you all right, I certainly envy you," and toss it on the window sill. Reading had become revolting to him, like stuffing an empty stomach with cotton. "High time to be publishing your own book," he would say, going to the window and drumming on the glass with his fingers. And both his "own book" and the pose at the window were loathsome to him. "What rot," thought Nikolai Ivanovich.

Only at night, as he lay in his damp bed with his skinny legs drawn up under him (thinking to himself—nobody but me needs such skinny legs, not a soul in the world), did Stabesov experience his only honest feeling—a feeling of self-pity. It was a bitter, fruitless, transporting pity in that empty cottage, to the accompaniment of the hostile roar of the sea, spitting its spray to the very porch. Spitting and indifference and irksome noise, noise, noise—this appeared to be the basis of everything, the fundamental law of the world.

One night, after having lain with his thoughts and his pity for some time, he felt hungry. The Tatar and his wife slept in a room at the other end of the house. Stabesov took a candle and went to the cupboard in his underpants, the strings of which kept getting under his feet. There he found some bread, hard-boiled eggs and salt wrapped up in a piece of paper. He returned to his bed, and with his gaze fixed on the flame of the candle, peeled an egg, then began to eat it slowly, holding it cupped in his hand and dipping it into the salt. Suddenly his eyes filled with tears. Nikolai Ivanovich hastily blew out the candle, pulled the covers up over his head and bit his lip as he repeated:

"Oh, hell, to hell with it all!"

.
Yekaterina Vasilievna had always had a weakness for peering through lighted windows when she was taking a walk. As

she stood out on the snowy sidewalk, she was cut off from "those" people only by a thin pane of glass that muffled the sound. Yet "that" life seemed to her elusive and different. Here, for example, was a woman leaning on the arm of her chair, her cheek on her hand. She was not even lost in thought, simply quiet. Her husband, collarless and in glasses, wet his finger to turn the page of a book while his glance lingered on the green shade of the lamp. Or here, in a spotless half basement room with a parquet floor sat three men—one at the piano, another moving a bow across the strings of the 'cello he held between his legs, and a third sitting on a divan. And the expression on the face of this third person was very serious, almost inspired. No sound was audible. The movements were slow and clumsy as though the people had become congealed for a brief instant without themselves realizing it and were listening to the flight of time whisking away the moments. Sad is the face of man when he is left to himself!

Yekaterina Vasilievna wanted very much to glance through the lighted window of Stabesov's cottage, but she could not bring herself to do it. From the Tatar she had learned all the details of Nikolai Ivanovich's life, and concluded that he was "terrifically proud."

But one evening as she was returning after dark from the sea she made up her mind. Running up the path, she stood on tiptoe and looked into his window. Stabesov was standing in his vest sewing a button on his coat by candle light.

"Heavens, the poor thing!" thought Yekaterina Vasilievna. The gravel crunched beneath her feet. Stabesov raised his head and looked through the window for a long time as Yekaterina Vasilievna hastened to her house.

When she arrived she said to the nurse, "It's a dreadful thing, Maria Kapitonovna, when a man has no one to look after him. There is nothing sadder on earth."

To which the respected Maria Kapitonovna (who, as she

herself maintained, knew men "inside out") answered disapprovingly, "Why waste pity on them?"

That evening Yekaterina Vasilievna felt particularly thankful that she had her home, her girls, and Maria Kapitonovna, "who loved the children as her own." And several times she sighed unconsciously on recalling how Stabesov had used the top of an inkwell instead of a thimble to push the needle.

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On a slope among rugged pines bloomed a rhododendron bush. In one night it seemed to have burst into flame, so suddenly did its sturdy, artificial-looking flowers bloom forth. Stabesov caught sight of it from the window and went out into the garden. Yekaterina Vasilievna was sitting on a bench nearby. He bowed; she extended her hand and said that they were acquainted. He was surprised by the kind, attentive way she looked at him with her long hazel eyes. It was as though she already knew something about him.

Nikolai Ivanovich smelled the bush, but the flowers had no scent. Yekaterina Vasilievna spoke of the bad spring and about the sea, finding it enchanting even on gloomy days. Stabesov considered a moment and agreed, then both of them turned and looked for some time at the agitated masses of water, the towering waves on the horizon.

Their meeting had been ordinary enough. It had even been something of a disappointment to Yekaterina Vasilievna: mainly Stabesov's tone, which she found independent and too self-sufficient ("And what about that button?" she thought). Nikolai Ivanovich, on the other hand, experienced a certain warmth in her presence, and his thoughts tended to be less hopeless that evening. The next day he suddenly found himself in need of writing paper, and he went over to Madame Bolotova's cottage, where he was, of course, made to stay for tea.

Yekaterina Vasilievna talked to him about her children, saying how much freedom they had here and how healthful it was

for them; in one week each of them had gained half a pound and their cheeks were like ripe peaches (when she spoke about her children, she made them seem as delicious as peaches); they were having difficulty with food supplies, but she was thinking of buying a goat; she also praised Maria Kapit-onovna, who at that moment came in to get some hot water. As she drew it from the samovar into an enameled pot, the nurse cast a sidewise glance at the gentleman and worthily pursed her wrinkled lips. "A rather mean lady," thought Stabesov. It was warm in the low room. The steam from the samovar cast shifting shadows on the ceiling where a long-legged spider was fly-hunting. In the nursery the little girls were relating some silliness to each other. When she returned, Maria Kapit-onovna muttered something and put them to bed. Stabesov played with his spoon, nodded his head, approved the purchase of the goat, made several attempts to cross his legs but was prevented by the low edge of the table, and all the while he kept thinking how pleasant all this was. Yekaterina Vasilievna accompanied him to the rhododendron bush which marked the boundary between their cottages; here they lingered for a while, silently gazing into the darkness; then they prophesied good weather for the morrow and parted. For Stabesov, the rest of the evening and the night (half of which was sleepless) passed fairly decently—a bit wearisome, a bit lonely.

Two days later Yekaterina Vasilievna called on Stabesov for "something to read." Stabesov despairingly rummaged through his specialized books, papers and magazines.

"Here, this isn't so bad, more or less popular," he said, handing her a little grey booklet. Yekaterina Vasilievna rolled it up (it was evident that she was not much of a reader), perched herself on the window sill and began to chatter as she swung her foot against the wall.

She was wearing a soft navy blue dress which made her hands and neck seem amazingly delicate. On that day the sun was sometimes hidden behind heavy clouds, sometimes burst forth

unexpectedly, burning into the wet earth and the sea, taking them by surprise, as it were, and hastened to chase away shadows which were already scuttling about. And each time the light flared up beyond the window, Yekaterina Vasilievna's hair was turned into old gold and the delicate shell of her ear became transparent.

As she discussed a play which had recently created quite a stir in Moscow (Madame Bolotova was a great lover of the theatre) she raised her hands and for some time adjusted the knot of hair on her neck. The taut sleeve gave a sharp outline to her elbow, and Nikolai Ivanovich, understanding little of what she was saying, began to be aware of her shoulder, her breast, and knee under the soft material.

With every moment Yekaterina Vasilievna became less comprehensible, or rather she assumed a new mood which could be comprehended only under the influence of something extraordinary, something out of the daily run. Her smile, the movement of her lips, the roguish shadows spreading from the corners of her mouth to her cheeks, her movements and her voice became unique and inimitable (he became very conscious of this quite suddenly). And all of this loveliness appeared when they were alone together, just the two of them.

This was a bit frightening, and a delightful little chill played strange music in his veins.

Evidently Yekaterina Vasilievna was also aware of something extraordinary. She blushed and seemed to say to Nikolai Ivanovich: "Here—this movement, this smile, this dimple and jest are for you alone; they never belonged to anyone else, and never will."

Nikolai Ivanovich shook his head and said with a short laugh. "There's something I'd like to tell you—it's commonplace enough. I'm afraid you'd find it boring to listen to me."

He pulled a long face, but held his breath in expectation. Suddenly Yekaterina Vasilievna said in all seriousness:

"I am all attention."

"Everything is sheer deception, Yekaterina Vasilievna," he cried, sticking his thumbs into his vest pockets. "Even our most joyful moments are instantly blighted: can you think of anything more vicious than that? What the devil do I want with such moments if I have to die anyway? Here I am, thirty-two years old, which means I have only twenty years left—or rather twenty minutes! Is it possible to go on living like this? I keep hearing how time tears past like wind on the roof. I feel like sitting down, clenching my teeth and waiting—for the end. It is painful to look at the sea, at the bright sky, at the flowers, at all those things that bind me to the earth. Because all of it is sheer deception, and I'm not falling a victim to it. Look at my hand—a year ago it wasn't so wrinkled. That's the real truth for you, everything else is deception. Books, philosophy, art, humanism—the devil take them all. I'm buried under a whole pyramid of such rubbish. I'm the most unhappy, the most degraded creature on earth, because—I have understood. And still I keep crawling out from under the heap like a worm in the rain."

Stabesov stopped and glanced into the unwinking eyes of Yekaterina Vasilievna. She had even grown pale from strained attention. All the pity she had felt for this abandoned human being was permeated by his words. She did not doubt that he felt that way, but not for a minute did she believe that there was no escape from such despair. Scarcely restraining her tears, she took Nikolai Ivanovich by the hand (his fingers were ice cold), and, quickly, almost in a whisper, she said:

"You know that it is not true. Why do you speak like that? Remember that I have children, I couldn't possibly look upon them as dead."

He bent over her hand and kissed it several times. At every touch, his lips became warmer. He prolonged the last kiss for some time.

She saw his bent head with its thin, parted hair, she saw the

collar which was too big for his neck, and she thought, "What a dear he is!"

"Now, you see!" she whispered.

Obviously these words were intended to say that no dead words could convince her that her child was born only to die and that a person withered with loneliness was right in his views, and that the mind alone, unnourished by warm waves of feeling, could escape becoming dull and pathetic.

But she was incapable of saying all this, and only in a wonderful impulse (when she squeezed his hand and gazed into his eyes, repeating, "Now, you see?") did she bestow on Nikolai Ivanovich all her abundance of pity and tenderness.

It was much later that Stabesov understood this. Now he was conscious only that his horrible emptiness was being filled up with a warm and living beauty. He was overcome by such weakness that he went over to the divan and sat down.

"I have never said that to anyone else in my life," he said. "And the strangest thing about it is that—yes, yes—apparently there must be another kind of truth. And you are—wonderfully wise. In one phrase you have refuted me more surely than could have been done in a thousand volumes."

(Later, neither he nor she could remember that strange phrase.)

Nikolai Ivanovich smiled as he lighted a cigarette. His eyes were shining. In her agitation and embarrassment, Yekaterina Vasilievna suddenly remembered that it was time to feed the children, and went home. When she had gone, Stabesov stretched out on the divan and continued to smoke and smile.

That was how their friendship began.

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The days became warmer and more enchanting. The grape-vine on the southern slope grew green; the sticky leaves of the hedges had curled up; the evening air was filled with the scent of flowers and the sea.

Masses of bright clouds rose above the mountains and stood motionless in the sky until sunset. The sea reflected the clouds and the gulls.

Stabesov and Yekaterina Vasilievna were always together, sometimes on the sand where the children were playing, sometimes on the mountains where they went in search of the wild asparagus which grew in ditches among thorn bushes. After their search, they would lie on a blauket and look down from their height upon the vast expanse of water patterned with blue where the currents crossed, and at the dense cloud banks beyond the promontory.

It seemed as though far, far away, there stood a sacrificial altar from which huge clouds of smoke were rising. This did not reveal very subtle imagination, but they liked the idea, and repeated it every time they glanced at the sky.

In a few days the health of Nikolai Ivanovich showed marked improvement. He became bright, energetic, and witty. He described the dullness of his former life by quoting books—so closely had his past been bound up with books and images of other men's creating.

"I was the most ordinary kind of bookworm," he told her now. "An intellectual who was mortally afraid of fresh air. I could not even have imagined the joy of lying and looking up at the clouds. Something has happened—something has happened—"

Yekaterina Vasilievna, completely in the grip of their friendship, grew thoughtful and prettier than ever before. Her face was delicately tanned. She thought of Stabesov all the time—tenderly, fearfully, and with some perplexity. Sometimes as she lay in bed she would cry. But she could not have explained what it was that caused her alarm, what premonitions clouded her joy. And the more simple, friendly, and cheerful Nikolai Ivanovich was in her company, the more upset she was at the end of each long, sparkling, joyful day.

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Little crabs as quick as spiders appeared among the rocks. The children splashed barefoot through the lazy tide in an effort to catch them, but the crabs were too quick for them.

Nikolai Ivanovich lay stretched out on the sand. Only the end of his nose, his smiling mouth and his beard could be seen under the edge of his hat. As Yekaterina Vasilievna watched the children her heart beat faster, so delightful was the splashing of the water, the smell of the sea breeze, the sun, the high voices of the children in their white, knee-length dresses.

The girls had no luck with the crabs, and they cried. "Mamma, come help us!" Yekaterina Vasilievna threw off her sand-filled slippers, took off her stockings, gathered up the skirt of her white dress and entered the water, laughing merrily at her fear. A moist coolness lapped gently at her feet. Behind a stone hid a large crab with tragic bulging eyes. She quickly reached down for it, but the crab slipped away and disappeared in the muddied water. In the enthusiasm of pursuit, she kept going further, splashing through the waves and wetting the sleeves and the hem of her dress. But she managed to catch one little crab, which wriggled about, tickling the palm of her hand.

"Just look how hideous it is," she said, coming out of the water.

Stabesov, raising himself on his elbow, stared at her as though seeing her for the first time. Her heart sank.

"How awkward, how stupid," she thought, hastily letting down her skirt. She sat down on the sand and sought protection behind her parasol, blushing until the tears came.

The children took the crab and ran off with it, far along the edge of the water.

Stabesov turned over on the sand and said, drawing out his words, "I was thinking as I watched you: the poets once called woman a perfect creation of nature. That is, of course, a commonplace, but still it contains a measure of truth (that is how he expressed it: "a measure of truth"). When a woman

appears on the landscape, a change immediately takes place in nature: for the spectator, what had been purely contemplation becomes, I might say, provoking. It acts on the nerves, rousing entirely different emotions."

Suddenly he laughed, revealing a gold tooth back in the corner of his mouth. Then he hastily added:

"Of course I am joking, my dear Yekaterina Vasilievna."

Without answering, Yekaterina Vasilievna drew her bare feet under her dress in horror. And when Stabesov pulled at her parasol to get a look at her face, she cried angrily "Leave me alone!" and, gathering up her slippers and stockings, she ran away.

They did not see each other that evening. On the next day Stabesov spoke seriously with Yekaterina Vasilievna, blaming yesterday's jest on his own clumsiness, embarrassment, etc. Everything was patched up, of course, and they did not again refer to the unpleasantness.

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Nikolai Ivanovich was sitting on the very steps where a month before he had sat and frowned at the wind and the salt spray. Now the sea was only slightly disturbed and the crest of each wave was tinged with blue; the entire expanse of the water was sun-spangled and it seemed that it must have been on just such a day that Icarus, in the intoxication of ecstasy, had fastened his wings with wax and soared above the sea to the sun, the source of all life.

Yekaterina Vasilievna came up behind him and said:

"Look, a sail."

The black silhouette of a boat carrying a diagonal Tatar sail slid shorewards at a sharp incline over the dazzling surface of the sea.

Nikolai Ivanovich said, "One could sit for hours absorbing this eternal life through one's eyes and ears and very pores. I can understand the kingdom of heaven on earth: one should

achieve immortality here, in this world. Every moment becomes an eternity in my emotional experience."

Yekaterina Vasilievna sat down next to him on the step, leaned her elbows on her knees, and dropped her chin on her fists. During the three days since the incident with the crab her face had assumed a new severity, as though she had been immersed in a cold bath. She either avoided long conversations with Nikolai Ivanovich, or else listened absent-mindedly. For a long time he studied her graceful profile with a sprinkling of freckles that gave her a girlish look.

"However funny it may sound, the fact is that I'm a little bit afraid of you," he said. "If it weren't for that ridiculous fear, I'd tell you something."

She shook her head in annoyance and continued to gaze at the approaching sail. Nikolai Ivanovich gave a short laugh:

"What I want to say is connected with my whole perception of life. I shall have to say it sometime; it is of tremendous importance to me."

Yekaterina Vasilievna suddenly interrupted him, still without turning her head:

"You're an egoist—the most complete egoist I've ever known in my life." Her voice was sharp. "Not even an egoist—just an absurd bookworm."

In utter amazement Nikolai Ivanovich asked what she could mean. Receiving no answer, he shrugged his shoulders and pretended to be offended. Gradually his hands began to tremble.

In a few minutes Yekaterina Vasilievna said cheerfully.

"Now I know whose boat that is. It belongs to the brother of your watchman, the Tatar Mamai-khan, though of course he's no khan at all, but just a fisherman. Let's go for a sail."

She rose quickly and ran down to the sea. Nikolai Ivanovich watched her graceful step and the way her white batiste dress blew in the wind. She spoke to the fisherman, then turned

around and beckoned to him. "How do you like that?" muttered Nikolai Ivanovich to himself. "First I'm an egoist, then—oh, for the love of God!" and he climbed down, hanging on to the railing.

Mamai-khan grinned on seeing him, placed a board from the bow to the shore, and helped them climb in.

At first it was necessary to row away from shore. Then the sail was hoisted, the boat careened, and frothing waves broke against the bow.

Mamai-khan sat at the rudder, with his sheepskin hat pushed to the back of his head. His quilted pants were rolled up to the knees of his sinuous legs; a copper chain holding amulets was strung through his vest; his pock-marked, sun-blackened face remained indifferent to all the vicissitudes of life. Whenever the wind grew stronger, filling the sails until the mast creaked, he bared his white teeth and spat in the sea. It was said that before the war Mamai-khan had carried contraband goods from Constantinople in this boat—tobacco, silk, and weapons. He was a son of this rocky, seawashed earth, an earth now in full bloom and careless of death, earth which Stabesov now really saw for the first time.

Nikolai Ivanovich toyed with his beard. He had a passing sense of being hurt, as though he had not been invited to join in a game. He had been called an egoist. But again the proximity of Yekaterina Vasilievna made him forget all these complications.

She had flung herself face down in the bow of the boat, her white-stockinged legs crossed, her tousled head propped up, gazing meditatively at the waves. Two buttons had come unfastened on the back of her dress near the neck, where the sunburn ended. "What a vulgar imagination I have after all!" thought Stabesov. Then he lay down beside her and said, "Well?" Naturally, she did not answer. His desire was absolutely clear: to bend down and kiss her on the lips. He made a great effort to think up a subject of conversation. His mind was in

a turmoil. Stabesov leaned on his elbow and plucked at his beard. Low over the water swooped a gull; a particularly large wave struck the bow, covering them with refreshing spray. And it seemed that the wave was soft-scented, as was the sea and the sail and the wind—all of them were laden with the warm scent of carnation emanating from Yekaterina Vasilievna's dress and hair.

"You're a darling, a real darling," said Stabesov in an unnatural voice.

Yekaterina Vasilievna's shoulder twitched—and nothing more.

He took her hand and touched it with his cold nose, straining to kiss her cheek, which also was fragrant with carnation. Yekaterina Vasilievna freed her hand and continued silently gazing at the waves. He noticed that her eyes were filled with tears.

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Nikolai Ivanovich lighted two candles in the candlesticks on the table and placed two others on the washstand to make the room brighter and more festive. He drew the curtain and he himself covered the tea table with a clean sheet in lieu of a tablecloth. He found some marmelade and cakes in a suitcase. The Tatar brought in the samovar and put the lid on.

With an appraising glance at the room, Nikolai Ivanovich began to walk back and forth, stopping to light a cigarette; with his thin legs, he paced diagonally across the unpainted floor, listening for the slightest sound, laughing softly to himself, adjusting a lock of hair that fell into his eyes.

He was wearing a clean collar and a black tie in a soft bow. He had taken off his pince-nez and placed them on the inkwell. To his nearsighted eyes the flames of the candles were misty yellow spots, as though seen through the steam of a bathhouse. But he knew that his eyes were far more expressive without his glasses.

Earlier in the day, while they were still in the boat after his unsuccessful attempt to kiss her, Stabesov had invited Yekaterina Vasilievna "to come for a cup of tea with him this evening." She had answered shortly, "I'll come." Nothing else of any importance had transpired in the boat.

Now it was late; apparently Yekaterina Vasilievna was putting the children to bed and at any moment would rap on the window.

The purpose of this invitation was: "to spend an evening in friendly conversation." That was how Nikolai Ivanovich formulated it—making, perhaps, the mental reservation that certain liberties might be allowed if they developed out of the conversation. But no more than this. He consciously suppressed ideas of going any "further," for "he had never been a boor," and considered it demeaning to lure a woman with the aid of tea and marmelade.

And still, at present he found all his preparations distasteful. He was ashamed of the marmelade, and especially of the fact that he had taken off his pince-nez. "But one can't always be expected to be up to the mark," he thought, washing his hands with eau-de-Cologne.

He did not doubt for a moment that Yekaterina Vasilievna would come. In general, Stabesov could not imagine her without himself; whenever he thought of her, he was present; his imagination never accompanied her to the house with the tiled roof; when she left him, it was as though she disappeared altogether; but her words, her smile, her movements and fragrance, all her unspeakable loveliness rose in his memory with exhausting frequency, agitating him with ever new poignancy.

The clock struck nine. Nikolai Ivanovich stopped abruptly and glanced into the darkness of the next room where the clock was ticking. Then he pushed back the curtains and glanced through the window. He was conscious of the soft beating of the surf, the smell of flowers and the sea. All the lights were

out in her cottage. "Strange," he muttered, feeling his heart race, then sink. He put on his pince-nez and went out.

The brief sunset had long since faded from the sky, but the night had not yet lighted all its stars, had not yet taken complete possession. On the steps at the embankment he made out the vague whiteness of a seated figure. Nikolai Ivanovich approached. She quickly turned her head as though upset—or perhaps it only seemed so to him.

"So this is where you are," he said softly. "And here I was waiting for you. The samovar cooled off long ago."

With a glance into his face, she slowly reached out for the railing and got up. She had just been crying bitterly over the fact that Nikolai Ivanovich had reduced all the excitement and complications of their relationship to a cup of tea, and that she had agreed to go, and that she would certainly go and drink that bitter cup, and that at the moment she was sitting by the dark, eternal sea which would continue to murmur in just the same way after she was dead and after everybody else was dead.

On hearing footsteps, she had almost jumped up and run away. Nikolai Ivanovich stopped at her side and muttered something in a hoarse, agitated voice. Her heart sank. She glanced penetratingly at this man whose eyes were hidden behind pince-nez in which the stars were reflected. And suddenly it seemed to her that he was doomed to die that very year—thin, lonely, pathetic—and that the fact of his inviting her to drink tea with him was obvious and pitiful subtlety. The moment had come when the stern angel abandoned her post. The most meagre words of love would have been enough for Yekaterina Vasilievna. Let him only knock, however softly and tenderly, and the gates would be joyfully thrown open.

"Now he will take my hand and say, 'My darling, my life, I love you,'" thought Yekaterina Vasilievna, "and I will give myself to him entirely, remaining true to him, to myself, and to my children."

She hung her head and was silent. Her hand slipped from the railing and fell at her side. But at that moment Nikolai Ivanovich was exerting all his energy on formulating phrases which should express the innocence of his intentions. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. Silence was fatal. He felt that, but was powerless, for he did not understand what was taking place. The moment passed.

Suddenly Yekaterina Vasilievna asked in a trembling, almost severe voice,

"Nikolai Ivanovich, do you love me?"

He moved toward her breathing heavily, and took her hand. "How can you ask me? I can no longer sleep at night. I think of you all the time. My emotions have made a sick man of me. Tonight I waited for you like a crazy man. . . . Why do you behave so strangely with me? I realize how clumsy I am, but everything is on fire within me. You torture me, and you do not wish to understand. . . ."

"But do you love me?" she interrupted.

He dropped her hand, which fell inanimately and wiped his brow. Yekaterina Vasilievna began to laugh quietly.

"You are capable of smothering any feeling," muttered Nikolai Ivanovich. "You breathe the coldness of a cellar."

She took him by the arm and drew him toward the cottage, saying with the same laughter:

"My dear friend, difficult conversations should be carried on in the darkness, where you can't see each other's eyes and feel ashamed. Then it is possible to come to the point. I only asked you if you loved me—a perfectly innocent question, but you immediately became angry. You and I are very bad lovers, but we shall be very good friends. Now let's go to your house and have tea."

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Yekaterina Vasilievna laughed out loud when they entered the room and she noticed the candles on the washstand, the sheet, and all the details. Then she sat down at the samovar and acted as hostess, calling Stabesov a "miserable bachelor." He sat with a crooked smile frozen on his face and gave the wrong answers. He was hurt, wounded, agitated, perplexed. . . . In the end, he became indignant:

"I am forced to realize that you consider me a vulgar beast," he said, glancing with repulsion at his thin hands. "That is how you interpret my behaviour. But it is nonsense, it is a lie. You have upset me. You can't act like that toward—toward—" he twisted his beard in his fury "—toward one who loves you. Yes, I'm in love with you!"

Yekaterina Vasilievna sat down beside him on the divan, drew in her feet and covered them with her skirt.

"So that's how you declare your love! It would be better if I didn't understand Russian," she said, and threw back her head on the cushions. "Perhaps it would be better for us to say nothing."

Stabesov snorted, pulled out an empty match box and hurled it at the wall, yanked at his vest, fumed, calmed down, and finally glanced at Yekaterina Vasilievna out of the corner of his eye. She was sitting sad and lovely with her head thrown back. There was not the slightest shadow of ridicule on her delicate lips. After a moment's pause she said in a scarcely audible voice:

"Well, we have made up."

As he gazed at her face, he again became conscious of the warm scent of carnation. Softly and uncertainly he touched her hand.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's all so sad," she whispered.

"What is?"

She did not answer, and he began to draw his own con-

clusions. "Oh, yes, I understand," he thought. "What you need is a handsome brute who will grab you by those hands, twisting and torturing you. . . . You find it sad that I have not the muscles of an ox. . . ."

"Oh, how sad it is," she repeated with a sudden sigh, and he saw that her lips were trembling.

Stabesov got up and kissed her lips clumsily and painfully. Suddenly a wild look entered her long, amazed eyes.

"Listen, listen," muttered Stabesov, grabbing her by the shoulders. . . .

Her agitated voice mingled with his hoarse muttering. The green bolster rolled off the divan onto the floor. At last Yekaterina Vasilievna tore herself free of his hands, jumped up, and walked over to the table. . . . Her flushed face seemed suddenly to have become thin. She looked long and furiously at Stabesov with clear, cold eyes. . . . Never before had she seemed so lovely.

"You're a fool," she said in a ringing voice. "You're simply loathsome, and I'll never forgive you this insult."

Suddenly she closed her eyes tightly and huge tears appeared from beneath her lashes. Then she rushed toward the door and turned around, all aflame with anger:

"You won't forget that you have offended me!"

"I'm wretchedly unhappy," said Stabesov in a dull voice which he himself could not hear. "Don't go away. Have pity on me."

Then she even gathered up her skirts and nodded her disheveled head.

"I hate you now. Now we shall never see each other again."

And she left. For some time he stood listening to the crunching of the gravel. Then he felt in his vest pocket for his pince-nez and went out to the embankment.

The heavens burned with the blue fire of the constellations, and far out on the horizon the Milky Way found reflection in the dark waters of the sea.

Stabesov sat on the steps and held his chin in his hands. . . . The earth was invisible in the darkness. Here he was utterly alone. The earth seemed to have flown away to the stars, and an inscrutable expanse of ether separated him from this earth, from this life which for so brief an instant had lured him with warmth and beauty.

1916





THE ANCIENT ROUTE

ONE DARK SPRING night a tall man in a military cape climbed the steep ladder leading to the forecastle deck of an ocean liner. Paul Torrain ascended slowly and laboriously, step by step. The three gold bands on his cap gleamed in the light of the mast light. Skirting the slime-covered anchor chain, he paused at the prow of the ship, leaned over the rail and stood thus, motionless. Only the hem of his cape stirred in the light breeze.

The boat was in darkness save for the green and red navigation lights and the two mastlights obscured by the imperceptible shroud of mist up above. The stars too were hidden. The night was dark. Down below the steel prow cut through the water with a low gurgle.

Leaning on the rail, Paul Torrain gazed down at the water with eyes that smarted from fever. He felt the breeze penetrate his whole body and the sensation was not unpleasant. His mind shrank from the thought of the stuffy cabin, the hot bunk, the nurse asleep under the glaring lamplight which threw into bold relief the white kerchief, the blood-red cross on the smock, the parchment face of the dreary companion of suffering. She was escorting Paul Torrain back to France, the land of his birth. Now she had dozed off and Paul had seized the opportunity to steal quietly out of the cabin.

Down in the basalt depths of the sea he saw a luminous creature glide past—a long, curved, pinkish body with the head of a sea-horse. Moving its fins lazily, it watched the

approaching hull of the vessel with supreme unconcern until the current swept it aside. The water looked cool, its depths inviting.... The nurse with the blood-red cross might scold as much as she pleased.... Existence, Paul felt with a pang of sorrow, would soon cease for him, like a path that drops down into a bottomless abyss, and hence immeasurably more important than the medicines, the bed and the tasteless food was this nocturnal stillness where flowed memories of poignant majesty.

The ship was sailing along the ancient route of civilization men had traversed when they made their way from the Attic oak groves to the dark Hyperborean lands. They called it the Hellespont then in memory of unhappy Helle who had fallen into the sea while fleeing eastward with her brother on a golden ram to escape the wrath of their stepmother. It must have been the Pelasgians, the shepherds who had roamed the gorges of Argolis with their flocks, who invented that tale about the stepmother and the ram. Gazing out to sea from the rock-bound coast, they had seen the sails and the vessels of curious contours filled with short, stout, large-nosed men bringing copper weapons, golden ornaments and cloth as bright as blossoms. The copper-studded boats dropped anchor off the virgin shores and the stalwart, white-skinned Pelasgians with light-blue eyes came down to the shore with their flocks. Their forebears could still remember glacial plains, the flight of stags in the moonlight and caves ornamented with drawings of mammoths.

The Pelasgians exchanged animals, wool, cheese and dried fish for metal weapons. They marveled at the tall ships with the brass figureheads and stern ornaments. Whence hailed these merchants of short stature and large noses? The Pelasgians may have known them, but later the knowledge was forgotten. Many centuries afterward legend had it that the shepherds had seen vessels with rent sails driven by a fiery gale past Hellas' shores while the mariners lifted their hands in

despair, and that it was then that the land of copper and gold perished.

Could that have been true? No doubt it was: the memory of man does not lie. In Ballads it was told that thenceforth copper-clad warriors appeared in deserted Hellás. With terror and violence they enslaved the Pelasgians. Calling themselves princes, they forced the Pelasgians to build fortresses and walls of cyclopic stones. They taught the population to till the soil, to trade, and to wage war. They sowed dragon's teeth and warriors sprang forth. They instilled fear and avarice into the hearts of the blue-eyed Pelasgians. The roseate dawn of history broke over Hellas. The copper sword and the golden tripod from which issued smoke of an intoxicating fragrance stood at the cradle of the European nations.

On these same shores of the Mediterranean Paul Torrain, descendent of the Pelasgians, had been pierced by a bullet in the lung and, poisoned by gas released from an airship, and now, dying of tuberculosis and malaria, he was returning from flaming Hyperborea to Paris along the ancient route traversed by merchants and conquerors of old, a route connecting two worlds—the East and the West—a route that passed between shores where the skulls of vanished kingdoms lay under grave mounds, a route in whose depths skiffs, once sailed by the Achæans, the triremes of Mithridates and the luxurious ships of Byzantium slumbered amid the seaweed, and in whose shallows off steep clayey banks lie rusty torpedoed steamships.

It seemed, at least to Paul, that he was now completing the cycle of the ages. His brain, stimulated by the fever and sense of impending death, sought to grasp in its entirety the struggle, the rise and the fall of the multitude of nations that had passed over this very route. As the memories surged he relived the long past. Within a few days, perhaps, his brain would cease to function and with it that which he bore within him, the world itself, would perish. What did it

matter to him whether the world would exist when he, Paul Torrain, was no more? In his consciousness the world would cease to be and that would be the end. Leaning against the rail, and staring drenched with dew into the darkness he completed the cycle.

The ship's bell clanged. The watch changed. Up above on the bridge stood the sleepless figure of the helmsman. The lamp lit up only his broad face as he bent over the quivering black hand of the compass, that soul of the ship. The night shadows thickened. The water below was no longer visible. Now the vessel seemed to be gliding through ethereal space. It was the darkness before dawn.

Paul's face and hands were covered with dew. He shuddered. How many human hands outstretched in death's last convulsions all over the world that night—all these nights—would be covered with the same dew.... Each of them who now at that very moment would be digging his teeth into earth mixed with blood, steel and excrement would be taking away with him a thousand years of what had been; in each bullet-pierced skull a thousand years of culture would crumble and disappear with a desolate crash. What a waste! What despair! If you were to show the blue-eyed ancestor the Book of Life, to turn over the pages of what was to come and to scan all the coloured pictures, that lighthearted forebear would scratch himself under his sheepskin and say: "A stupid, brutal book. There must be some mistake: look how much good effort has been expended, how people have multiplied, how many fine cities have been built, and here in the last picture all this is enveloped in flames, and with enough corpses to keep the fish in the Aegean Sea fed for a whole week..."

"Some mistake, some false move on the chessboard." Paul Torrain reflected. "History is heading for an abyss. What a glorious world is perishing!"

He closed his eyes and with a poignant sadness recalled Paris, his window, the pale blue morning and the deeper blue

shadows of the city, the trees in the boulevard and the rounded roofs stretching away into the mist, the raindrops on the window sill, the voice of the carrot vendor down in the street urging on his horse, the merry voices of those who rejoiced to be alive on such a glorious morning. He remembered his table piled with books and manuscripts exhaling the freshness of early morning. And he recalled his own intoxicating happiness and goodwill to all men.... What a splendid book he had written at the time about justice, goodness and happiness! He had been young, healthy and rich. He had yearned to promise youth, health and wealth to everyone. At that time it had seemed to him that goodness of heart, a new social contract enriched by the achievements of physics, chemistry and engineering, would alone be able to bestow these gifts upon all mankind.

What sentimental nonsense! That was the spring before the war. In the heat of the moment it had indeed seemed that the Germans must be fiends, devil's spawn who were threatening the divine pillars of humanism. In the heat of the moment it had seemed that the old banner of the Convention had been unfurled over France and that it was for human rights, for liberty, equality and fraternity that the French battalions were being mowed down by machine-gun fire.

How passionately Paul wished he could again believe in that morning when, in a burst of sheer joy, he had thrown open his window onto mist-wreathed Paris! But if this happiness had been trampled by soldiers' boots, torn to pieces by shells, saturated with poison gases, then what remained? What was the purpose of Hellas, Rome, the Renaissance, all that steel clanger of the 19th century? Or perhaps the end of everything was a mound of skulls overgrown with the spiky grasses of the desert? No, no—somewhere the truth must be! I cannot, I must not die on a hopeless night like this!

* * *

"Monsieur, you are exposing yourself to the air again. You will harm yourself, monsieur," the sleepy voice of the nurse sounded behind his back.

Paul returned to the cabin and lay down without undressing. The nurse forced him to take some medicine and brought him something hot to drink. The engine throbbed softly in the bowels of the ship. The medicine bottles tinkled on the shelf. As a matter of fact it was all rather pleasant—it almost gave one the hope of salvation; the warm glow of the lamp shade, the soft bunk in which his bony, fever-scorched frame seemed to float as on a cloud. Paul dozed off, but only for a few moments. And once again his fevered imagination was at work. Insomnia stalked him: He dared not sleep, there was too little time; his thoughts were far too important. . . .

One memory persisted longer than the others. Paul tossed restlessly on his cot, locked his chilled fingers together and cracked them. Two months ago in Odessa he had received a familiar long envelope. It was from his cousin and fiancée Lucy.

"Dear and distant friend," she wrote, "I am terribly lonely, terribly sad. There has been no news from you. You write to your mother and brother, but to me, never. I know how depressed you must feel and that is why I am trying to write to you once more. . . . It is hard for you, I know, and it is hard for me as well. Four years of separation—four eternities have swept over my barren life. The thought of you, the hope that perhaps you might still have need of the remainder of my youth, my wounded heart and my great love that alone keeps me alive, pursuing my monotonous daily round in the hospital, spending my nights at the bedside of the dying, knitting mittens for soldiers, reading the casualty lists every morning. . . . France is one vast cemetery where a whole generation of youth, broken hearts and unfulfilled hopes lie buried. We are the living mourners, the nuns following the dead to their graves. Paris is becoming an alien city. Paul, do you remember how we

loved the city's ancient stones, remember the soul-stirring history we read in them? Now the stones of Paris are dumb, they are being trod by the feet of strangers. . . . And only the old folk huddled by the fire still make bellicose gestures and talk of the past glory of France. . . . But we find it hard to understand them. . . ."

At this point the text of the letter Paul had read a thousand times over broke off in his memory. He had not answered it. He could not do it. What could he write to this girl who still wished to bestow her melancholy love upon him? What would he do with it? What would a corpse do if someone thrust a bouquet of roses into its twisted hands? Yet somehow the memory of foolish little Lucy with her lips trembling like a child's haunted him. A year ago when he had been in Paris (for one day) he had offended Lucy, tormenting them both in the process. "Have you ever seen a bourgeois who has lost his whole fortune in a single moment coming down the steps of the Paris stock exchange?" he had said. "Offer him a posy of violets *in compensation*. . . . Voilâ! It is terrible, Lucy. I am finished. There is nothing for me to do but return to the smouldering embers in the paleolithic cave and search for my trusty stone axe among the debris. . . ." It was then that Lucy's innocent young lips had quivered. . . . But to pity her was nonsense, nonsense. Pity belonged with all the rest of the nonsense in that unfinished book blind happiness had written and whose pages had been ruffled by the spring breeze. . . . Pity had been seared out of him by the poison gas of war. . . .

Just before dawn Paul dropped off again for a while. He was awakened by a hoarse blast from the ship's siren. His nerves went taut. A shaft of light poured through the porthole and in its glare the yellow folds on the nurse's face looked repulsive. She took the blanket and led Paul out onto the deck, helped him into a deck chair and covered his legs.

With a deafening roar, the steamer was emerging from the Dardanelles into the Aegean Sea. The charred remains of bar-

racks and blown-up fortifications were visible on the low clayey banks. A rusty steamer with its stern under the water lay in the shoals. The war had been called off for a time; those who had caused it were marshaling their forces, and in the meantime the nations had been permitted to rejoice and make merry. What could be better! The morning was warm and moist. The steamer (it was the *Carcovado*, a 6,000-ton steamer of the South American Line requisitioned from the Germans and used for transporting troops, refugees and perishable cargoes), listing slightly to port, glided farther and farther away from the coast into the azure expanse. A stern ragged sun climbed higher and higher to a formidable altitude in the cloudless sky. The black glossy back of a porpoise with a sword-like fin leapt out of the sparkling water in front of the ship. "Mamma, Mamma, a porpoise!" a fair-haired child standing at the rail cried in Russian, pointing a skinny little arm at the sea. A whole school of porpoises were disporting themselves ahead of the vessel. One felt that surely it must have been on a morning like this that Aphrodite, the gem of life, her limpid eyes dilated, rose from the placid waters of the Aegean Sea while the dolphins played. "Very well, let us endeavour to rejoice and be gay," Paul said to himself.

The fair-haired child hung over the rail delighting in the aquatic frolics of Aphrodite's companions; he was held by his mother who wore a soiled woolen shawl over her shoulders and a pair of well-worn shoes on her feet. The stamp of Russia's travail had petrified on her tear-stained face. In a hand that had not seen soap and water for a long time she clutched a sea biscuit. Little did she care that through narrowed eyelids Paul was seeing the shadow of the Argo in the sun's haze, that steep-sided barque with the slanting sail, glistening with the copper of shields and the spray dripping from the oars—the magic ship of the Argonauts, pirates and gold seekers, who had sailed the same ancient route from the shores of pillaged Colchis....

An elderly woman wearing imitation sable over a dressing gown made of cretonne window curtains waddled across the deck. There was something toad-like about her face and movements. Two over-bred lap dogs with pink ribbons trotted behind her. She was also traveling from Odessa. In the third class traveled four prostitutes she had lured by promises of wealth. ("Just wait, my chickens, till we get to Marseilles.") Now she bustled forward, bowing and revealing her false teeth as she greeted an acquaintance—a tall, badly dressed man with a vacuous face and upturned moustaches. He had got on at Constantinople, spoke Polish, strode about with an important air smoking a long pipe from which the saliva dribbled, and was on the lookout for aristocratic partners to invite to a game of cards. Passing Paul he clicked his heels with such vigour that his thighs quivered.

"The bedbugs crawl out of the woodwork of a doomed house," thought Paul. The boat steered for the southwest. Sharp-toothed purple summits overhung with dark clouds appeared on the distant horizon. Then the island rose as a ridge of mighty cliffs from the sea. The whole scene—the tranquil surface of the sea shot through with gleaming sunshine and the rugged outline of the distant island—was shrouded in gloom. Storm clouds hung over the island, a shroud of rain descended from the sky and—as if the throne of Zeus were truly there—a streak of lightning ran like a broken thread across the clouds. . . . A low rumble of thunder reached the ship.

"That's Imbros, a curious island. Always a storm over there," said behind Paul's chair an unshaven swarthy-complexioned man wearing a fez. In port the day before he had offered to exchange any currency Paul might wish, or to introduce him to the toad in charge of the four girls, and advised him, in passing, not to play cards with the bewhiskered Pole.

Paul closed his eyes so that the bony face under the fez should not mar his vision of the glory of Zeus, the god of

gods. To port appeared the low shores of Asia Minor whose every hill, every stone had been praised in hexameters—Troy, the land of heroes. Beyond the strip of sand along the coast spread a rusty plain crisscrossed by the channels of dried-up torrents. In the misty distance over toward the East rose the summits of Ida still touched here and there by patches of snow.

Paul got up from the deck chair and walked over to the rail. Once upon a time fields of wheat and maize rustled on these plains, gardens bloomed and great herds of cattle descended from the Phrygian Mountains. There was the flinty mouth of the Scamander, winding in a yellow stream that stretched far out into the sea. To the left were mounds, the tombs of Hector and Patroclus. It was here that the black vessels of the Achæans had been hauled out onto the sand, and over there on the sunparched plains where the land was now dug up and where the smoke curled up from a squalid hovel, once stood the cyclopic walls of Troy with the overhanging battlements, square towers and the golden, full-breasted statue of Aphrodite of Asia.

From time immemorial the Aeolean Greeks had sailed to the shores of Troy, settled there and engaged in tilling the soil and raising cattle. Very soon they had seen that the place was good and had proceeded to build the fortress of Troy at the entrance to the Hellespont in order to capture the route to the East. And Troy became a rich and powerful kingdom. On market days creaking carts loaded with grain and fruits made their way to the bazaar laid out under the high walls of the city; Slavs from the frontiers of Thrace came here, leading wild horses famed for their fleetness; Hets from Boghaskein came on luxurious chariots bringing wares made after the finest Egyptian manner; Phrygians and Lydians in leather helmets drove in herds of curly fleeced sheep; Phoenician merchants with false beards, in dark blue felt robes, cracking their whips drove black slaves carrying bales and clay amphoræ; venerable pirates armed with double-bladed battle axes

brought beautiful slave girls and handsome young boys, priests unfolded tents and put up altars shouting the names of the gods, threatening and urging the throng to bring their sacrifices. The guards looked down from the fortress walls at the bustle of the market place. Untold treasure was gathered inside the city and the rumour of it spread far and wide.

In those days Hellas was poor. The golden age of Mycenæ, Tyryns, Thebes built by heroes were long past. The cyclopic walls were overgrown with grass. The land was no longer fertile; the population was sparse—fishermen, shepherds and hungry warriors. The kings of Acheus, Argolis and Sparta lived in clay huts with straw roofs. There was nothing to trade with. Nothing to plunder at home. Trade passed Hellas by. All that remained was the legendary glory of the past, hot blood that rushed to the head, and unusual enterprise. The goal was obvious: to plunder and smash Troy, take possession of the Hellespont and compel the merchant vessels to put in at the harbours of Hellas. They began to seek a pretext for war, and, of course, nothing is easier to find than that. That is where Helen of Troy came in. They raised a hue and cry over the whole peninsula, summoned Achilles from Thessaly, perfidiously promising him half the booty. They consulted the Dodonian oracle and set out on their black vessels to usher in with the clarion tones of the hexameter the three thousand years' history of European civilization....

Since then, and to this very day evidently, no other means of mending matters than the sword, plunder and treachery had been found. The heroes of the Trojan wars had at least been magnificent in their plumed helmets and with their powerful thighs and stout hearts; they had not been poisoned by ideas of the triumph of good over evil. They had not written books about humanism beside an open window.

The boat turned west and the flat shore slipped away. Paul returned to his deck chair. "A poor substitute," he thought,

and repeated the words, "a lie no one wants to believe any more.... Destruction, destruction is inevitable.... History must begin all over again ... or else...."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders faintly: that "or else" had long since annoyed him in moments of meditation. But this "or else" was followed by something that went against nature: the world was being turned inside out, like a hide torn from the body of a beast.

A group of Russian émigrés appeared on deck. One of them, a brazen-faced young man with terrible eyes, watched the play of the porpoises, fidgeting and scratching himself.

"I bet I could hit one of them. Want to take me on?" he asked in a hoarse voice, pulling a rusty revolver out of his pocket.

His companion, a pale man with a beard parted in two, stopped him.

"Don't be a fool. This isn't Russia, don't forget. And in general, man, I would advise you to throw that gun into the sea."

"Not so fast, man.... This revolver has sent one hundred and twenty souls to kingdom come.... It ought to be put in a museum."

The two laughed mirthlessly, and a third hissed:

"Stop your row.... The captain is taking a nap. I believe...."

The Russian officers glanced at Paul and tiptoed away. The sun shone on the deck, resting on Paul's face as he slept. Through his lids his slumbering eyes saw a ruddy light.... Queer, what has happened to the sea (he wondered)? What a pity, what a pity.... (And he saw....) A desolate autumnal plain, telegraph poles, torn wires.... A chill wind is blowing. Yet his face is hot.... Down below, under the hill, straw-thatched cottages are burning smokelessly, noiselessly, like candles. Noiselessly the batteries fire at the village—blinding flashes from the muzzles. The faces of the gunners are

gloomy. . . . They are Frenchmen, Parisians, fighting for the rights of man. . . . Oh, hell! (Paul hears his teeth grinding. . . .) "You must do your duty!" he cries to the soldiers and feels the horse under him sag, its back give way as if broken, boneless. . . . And here at the battery among the gunners is the brazen-faced chap with the terrible eyes and the gun. Cringing odiously, scratching himself and giggling. . . . And suddenly he begins clawing at the earth, making rapid movements with his hands, like a dog. And out of the ground he drags two men in sailors' caps and brings them up to the horse with the sagging back: "Voilà, Monsieur le Capitaine, these men are Bolsheviks!" The two men have broad faces, their teeth are bared in a curious mocking smile and their eyes. . . . Ah, their eyes are mysteriously closed. . . . "You have shot them, you scoundrel!" Paul cries to the brazen-faced man with the fidgets and makes an effort to strike him with his stick, but his hand seems to be made of cotton wool. . . . His heart beats wildly. If only the sailors would open their eyes, he would gaze into them, and then perhaps he would understand. . . .

Paul was awakened by the dinner gong. Again the light, milky blue expanse. Mountainous islands receded in the distance. The rusty, war-torn *Carcovado*, listing on her port beam, ploughed through the glassy depths. The sun was about to set. Now and again a wisp of smoke appeared where the sky and the sea met. By evening Paul's fever dropped, and weariness enveloped him as if some unbearable weight were crushing him. He felt his hands and feet grow cold and the sensation was almost blissful.

* * *

Early in the morning the *Carcovado* dropped anchor in the murky yellow waters of the Salonika Bay. The city, spread out as on the palm of a hand between the brown and white chalk cliffs, had been destroyed by fire. The ruins of ancient walls encircled the scene of desolation from which white

minarets pointed skyward. The hot sun poured down. The chalk cliffs seemed to have been tamped down by the feet of tribes that had passed through these parts in search of happiness. A lighter full of soldiers put off from the shore, and a small towboat, puffing noisily in the sunny stillness, brought it alongside the ship. With a grating sound the gangway was lowered and Zouaves in grass-coloured tunics, red trousers and red boots clambered aboard in twos. Laughing, they threw down their kitbags and messkins and sprawled out on the shady side of the upper deck. A stench of sweat and dust arose and the air grew thick with tobacco smoke. The Zouaves did not care a hang for anything; an attempt had been made to transfer them to the Odessa front in Russia, but when they reached Salonika they decided they would rather go home and had elected a battalion Soviet. Under the circumstances it was deemed the wisest to send them home. "That's the stuff!" they cried rolling about the deck in an excess of vitality. "To hell with war! Let's go home to the girls!"

The boat stood until noon loading coal. Ragged Greeks, Turks and Levantines with clouts wound about their heads climbed up the shaky gangway, bending under the weight of their baskets; the coal dust made them all equally black-skinned; mixed with sweat it dripped like liquid boot polish from the tips of their Attic noses. The empty baskets flew down into the lighter below. From the bridge the first mate cursed at them through his megaphone. The passengers hung idly over the rail. At last the *Carcovado* blew its siren and churned up the filthy water behind its stern. The Zouaves waved their fezes at the retreating shore. And once again the azure serenity of the ages prevailed.

Far away to the right of the vessel Olympus swam by, its snow-clad peak shot through with purple veins. Zeus was gracious today—no cloud shadowed the gleaming summit. Presently Olympus too disappeared beyond the horizon. The Zouaves snored in the shadow of the lifeboats. Some of them

played dice, tossing them out of a small leathern cup onto the deck. One, a broad-shouldered fellow whose eyebrows and lashes were of a lighter shade than his rich tan, took the small Russian boy on his knees and, stroking his head tenderly with a huge paw, questioned him in a strange tongue about vital issues. The mother, with a tremulous smile of joy playing on her lips, watched from afar her son's successful debut in European society. . . . Ah, no, not one of these men would have wished to join Paul in the grave, to end the history of mankind.

Islands looking like giant loaves touched with a rocky mould and covered with stunted forests glided by close to the ship, now to port, now to starboard. The sea at their shores was green; it mirrored them in the bottomless depths of that inverted sky. The boat passed so close to one islet that Paul could see the dark-haired children playing at the threshold of a rude stone hut that leaned against the side of a cliff. A woman working in a vineyard shaded her eyes with her hand to look at the ship. The entire hillside was covered with vineyards. From time immemorial men had pounded at the slate with their picks so that the stony dust might give forth the golden-hued cluster—the sun's juice—reaching out for the light and the dew on its sinuous branch. The crest of the hill was bare. Rusty-hued goats roamed about and a man stood leaning on a stick. He wore a felt hat of the kind Homer's Greeks drew in brick-red on their black vases. The shepherd, the woman in her striped skirt, the children playing with a puppy and the white-haired old man below in a boat impassively followed with their eyes the war-mauled ship on whose deck Paul Torrain lay in a chair under his steamer blanket, his teeth chattering with fever and his mind beset with the chill thoughts of death.

The trumpet blared forth a loud tra-ta-ta-taam and the Zouaves rolled like peas to the poop where a tall Negro in a white cap stood beside the open galley door pouring soup.

into messstins from his steaming cauldrons. "Fill it up, don't be stingy!" cried the Zouaves, laughing and jostling one another. They dug their teeth into the bread, sipped their bean soup with animal-like gusto and, tilting back their heads, they poured the red wine down their throats from their canteens. Why, one could down a mountain of bread and an ocean of soup on a scorching blue day like this! An old brown bull that had been taken on board at Salonika stood behind the galley tied to a boom. He stared gloomily at the lively soldiers. "They'll eat me," he must have been thinking, "tomorrow for sure they'll eat me. . . ." A Zouave with a light fuzz on his upper lip and long, narrow eyes waved his mess-tin and shouted to the animal: "Cheer up, old man, tomorrow we'll sacrifice you to Zeus!"

A sugar manufacturer and his family who had fled from Kiev looked down at the soldiers' mess from the upper deck. There was the manufacturer himself, looking like a bald lobster in a dinner jacket; his son, a lyrical poet with a slim volume under his arm; Mamma, in a corset down to her knees and a sable fur from which protruded the greying bun of her coiffure; the fashionably dressed daughter-in-law, who shrank from vulgarity; three children, and a nurse with an infant in her arms.

"I don't like the looks of those soldiers," wheezed Papa-lobster, without taking the cigar out of his mouth. "I don't see a single officer around. I wouldn't trust those fellows."

"They do look like ruffians," said Mamma, "I saw them eyeing our trunks already."

The poet son gazed dreamily at the tip of the deserted shore of Euboea. "It would be nice to settle there with the wife and children, to see no one and walk about in a Greek tunic," this rich young man with the drooping nose must have been thinking.

The Zouaves down below poked fun at them.

"Hey, look at that pot belly up there with the cigar...."

"Hey, Uncle Lobster, throw us down a pinch of tobacco...."

"And tell your daughter-in-law to come downstairs and have some fun...."

"Oo, he's sore.... O, la, la! Don't worry, Uncle Lobster, stick it out. You'll have a fine time in Paris."

"We'll write and ask the Bolsheviks to give you back your factories...."

The rest of that day was filled with the noise, laughter and bustling of the Zouaves. The hot deck creaked as they ran back and forth. They were curious about everything, poked their noses everywhere as if they had taken possession of the *Carcovado* along with the first-class passengers. Papa the lobster went to complain to the captain but the latter only shrugged his shoulders: "You may complain about them in Marseilles if you wish...." The lady with the lap dogs, greatly apprehensive for the fate of her four girls, locked them up in a stoker's cabin. The Russian officers no longer showed themselves on deck. The Pole, outraged by the invasion of the rabble, went about seeking vainly respectable card partners. A Russian Anglophile politician, in pince-nez and with bits of straw in his untidy beard, crawled out of the hold and commenced to sow panic among the passengers by maintaining that there were disguised Cheka agents among the Zouaves and that the intellectuals on board the *Carcovado* were bound to be slaughtered.

That night they rounded the Peloponnesus—austere, rock-bound Sparta. Great constellations shone over the dark mirror of the sea as in a tale of Odysseus. The pungent smell of wormwood was wafted from the coast. Looking at the stars reflected in the bottomless depths of the water, Paul Torrain recalled the names of gods, heroes and events. Another sleepless night. He was exhausted after the day's excitement. But a curious change had taken place in him. Tears persistently

dimmed his vision at the thought of the grandeur and majesty of the world, the brief transient span of human life, the fullness and complexity of its laws. How he pitied his own heart—a diseased pouch that ticked off the seconds in this dazzling starry universe! Why had this desire to live returned to him? He had already reconciled himself to withdraw into nothingness—mournfully, gravely, like a dethroned monarch. And now this desperate regret. . . . Why? What enchantment had caused him to reach out once more to the sun's nectar? Why draw out the agony? . . . He endeavoured to weave again the fabric of his thoughts about the doom of the civilization, the vicious circle of humanity, about taking away with him when he departed the world that existed only in so far as he, Paul Torrain, perceived it. . . . But the fabric broke and the threads vanished into thin air. And his memory retained only the gay, lusty voices of the Zouaves and the tramp of their barbarous feet. He thought of the shepherd on the crest of the island, the woman clipping the vines, the black stevedores who had thrown down their coal baskets with loud laughter. . . .

"Courage, Paul Torrain! You have nothing to lose. On the one hand there is your culture, your truth, that which made you what you are and for which you consider every step you take to be reasonable and necessary. . . . And then there is the life of the millions. . . . Did you hear the tramp of their feet echoing over the ship? . . . Their life does not fit at all into your conception of truth. They, like those blue-eyed Pelasgians, stare from wild shores at your sinking ship with the rent sails. Lift up your hands and call upon your gods. Heaven will respond with nought but fire and the thunder of cannon. . . ."

* * *

Paul spent that night on deck. The dawn spread its coral, rose-hued glow over the water, a warm, moist wind stirred

the soldiers' linen hanging on the shrouds, the red bull lowed, and out of the water like a miracle rose the sun. The wind died down. The ship's bell clanged and presently the hoarse voices of people roused from the night's slumber echoed over the boat. Another hot day was beginning. The Zouaves, barefooted and pulling on their trousers as they went, ran to wash, dousing one another from the hoses with wild whoops. Smoke issued from the galley and the tall Negro in his white cap showed his white teeth.

Through the haze of sleeplessness Paul Torrain saw a dark, bloody trail dyeing the foam. The bull had been sacrificed to Zeus. The animal lay on his side, its belly swollen and the blood from its slit throat running down the scuppers into the sea. Then they threw its bluish entrails overboard, and the hide was strung up on a mast. The Negro, waving a huge spoon, delivered a speech to the Zouaves about his native land on the Zambesi River where food was called kus-kus, and where a carcase like this one was a great kus-kus, declaring that it was good when man had plenty kus-kus and very bad when there was no kus-kus!...

"Bravo, Chocolate! Cook us a heap of kus-kus!" roared the Zouaves, stamping their feet with joy.

The sun poured down. It laid a shining path across the sea. The heat hung in shimmering waves in the south. Mirages seemed to hover over there by the African shores. Sometime around noon a piercing female shriek issued from the red-hot bowels of the vessel. Presently several male guffaws were heard. The toad, eyes dilated with horror, ran across the deck, the beribboned lapdogs at her heels. It appeared that the Zouaves had discovered where the four girls were hidden and were attempting to batter down the door of the stokehold. Evidently the necessary measures were taken and before long the commotion subsided. First class seemed to be in a coma. The Zouaves lay on the scorching deck in their undershirts, Paul Terrain longed for some warmth but the sun could not dispel the chill that gripped

his body, made his teeth chatter and raised a red film before his eyes.

"In a bad way, old man?" someone behind him said in a low, stern voice.

Paul did not start, nor did he turn his head. "Yes, bad," he whispered through parched lips.

"Why did you start this mess? Why do you keep it up? Now you see what your civilization is? Death..."

An icy chill ran over his dry skin and there was a hum in his ears like the whirring of flywheels. It seemed to Paul that someone moved away from his deck chair... Or perhaps he had only imagined it because he wanted to hear the sound of human steps. But no, he could actually smell the soldier's uniform worn by the man who had spoken those harsh words to him... Could there indeed be Cheka agents on board?... What a pity the conversation had been cut short.

And all at once memory spread a tremulous vision before Paul's eyes. He saw...

... The clay walls of an overheated hut, a large white stove with bird and flower design on the corners. On the earthen floor a man in a short sheepskin jacket lies on his side, his arms tied behind his back. The dried blood is caked in his curly hair. His face, pale with hatred and suffering, is turned toward Paul. He speaks French with a grating accent:

"Go back where you came from... This isn't Africa. We may be wild, but we aren't savages... We won't sell our freedom. We'll fight to the last man... You hear—Russia will never be a colony! No, brother, behind your fine words I sense the slave driver..."

"What nonsense!" Paul was painfully sincere. "What nonsense! We have no thought of colonies. We are saving priceless treasures from destruction. There was once an invasion of Huns, and we smashed them on the Rhine... Now we are beating them on the Dnieper."

The man on the floor chuckled:

"So, you're one of those idealists?"

"Silence!" Paul rapped the table with his ring. "Speak civilly when you address an officer of the French army!"

"Why should I be silent, you'll have me shot in any case," said the captive. "And that's a pity, really.... You'll live to regret it, young man.... Better untie my hands and let me go. And take my advice and go back to France. Yes, and don't forget to throw that revolver of yours into the sea on the way. Your cause is lost in any case. There are five hundred million of us. We are your hands, your legs, your belly, your head. We are everything. And what have you got? Values? Culture? They're ours too.... We'll find other custodians for them and they'll be ours." (The wounded man crawled over to the table. His eyes, dilated, wild, terrible, held Paul in their power.) "I see you're an honest man, one of the best perhaps. What are you doing on their side when you ought to be with us?... They have poisoned you with gas, infected you with the fever, riddled you with bullets.... They have polluted everything sacred.... Then why are you with them? If it's a piece of bread you want, we could promise you that.... Pass your hand over your eyes, wipe off the cobweb of the centuries.... Wake up.... Wake up, Paul...."

With a groan Paul Torrain opened his eyes. When would this torment end? The jagged, jumbled splinters of memory, the daily hustle and bustle before his eyes, the whirr of the flywheels in his ears.... How he longed for the peace of oblivion!

That day too flickered out. And again over the sea rose the incandescent worlds, the streams of black light, clusters of primary matter emerging from the quanta of energy where the dark streams crossed, and the seeds of life driven by the light across the lens of the universe. Out of one of those micro-organisms Paul Torrain had derived his being. And

soon again his body, his brain, his memory would be projected in the dust of atoms into the icy spaces.

That night as the preceding one the nurse could not persuade him to go down to his cabin. And when she wept with frustration he raised a trembling, dried-up finger to the stars and said:

"That does me more good than all your medicines."

* * *

Early in the morning they passed Calabria; a rugged coast of jagged rocks and purple-grey boulders with a few bushes growing out of the cracks. Above were the brown terraced plateaus. Here and there small flocks of sheep grazed. On the cape stood a castle, its tower and ruined walls merging with the rocky landscape: the ancient retreat of pirates who had sailed out to plunder ships swept by the storm into this hell's hole. Over to the left, in the misty glow, smoke curled above the snowy summits of Etna and the blue shores of Sicily hove into sight. The *Carcovado* raced over the choppy waters of the Straits which Odysseus had so feared. The sugar manufacturer and his family, all in life belts, appeared on deck. There was a danger of floating mines here. The Zouaves amused themselves by spitting into the Strait. But soon they had emerged from the danger zone and the rusty prow of the *Carcovado* nosed through the turquoise waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The politician with the straw in his beard strode across the deck and addressing no one in particular said in a loud voice:

"The barometer is falling, gentlemen!"

And indeed the heat grew hourly more intense. The sky had a metallic hue. The air to the south seemed to move in thick waves as if water were being boiled over there. Mischief began to brew on board as a result of idleness, the heat and the blinding glare. The word went around that one of the toad's

girls had been carried off that night to the captain's cabin. The captain had not been seen on the bridge since the day before. It was discovered that the other girls had escaped from the stokehold. One of them was found in the hold where she was being passed from hand to hand, screaming and scratching. They shut her up in the sick bay under the eye of the ship's doctor. The Zouaves whispered uneasily among themselves. Now one, now another would spring up from the burning deck and disappear into the dark depths of the boat which smelt of rats and mould and whose iron plating creaked to the sighs of the engines.

The barometer continued to fall. The Russian woman sat dejectedly under a lifeboat. Her little boy slept, his head, damp with perspiration, resting on her knee. Even the clatter of cutlery in the galley had subsided. And suddenly from somewhere below came the sound of a brief scuffle, blows and muffled cries. . . . Two men in stained linen trousers, naked to the waist and their hair disheveled, appeared on deck. Glancing over their shoulders they broke into a run. One of them was nursing a bleeding hand.

"He chopped my finger off, he chopped my finger off!" he panted hoarsely. He halted, tore off his wooden clog (the other foot was bare) hurled it into the sea, and ran on crying: "He chopped my finger off!"

The other, taller than the first, ran after him in silence. Under the shoulder blade on his sinewy back was a bloody welt on which tooth marks were clearly visible. The stench of sweat and blood filled the air. On the heels of the first two men a third appeared on deck—a man with a long narrow face and dark hair, wearing a torn cotton shirt. Setting his legs apart he emitted a piercing whistle, as if signaling in a deserted spot in the dead of night. The Zouaves sprang up, their eyes wild, their moustaches bristling. In a moment they had crowded thickly around the injured stokers. They breathed

noisily, their chests heaving. The tall one with the welt on his back began in heart-rending tones:

"He's got both girls in his cabin...."

"Who?"

"Chocolate...."

"He's got a knife!" cried the one with the chopped-off finger. "A huge knife and a skewer.... Chopped my finger off.... We'll all be murdered here.... We'll never get home alive...."

The whistle sounded again. Whereupon all of them—the soldiers and the stokers—ran down the companion ladders.... Presently loud voices were heard. The toad with her two lap dogs in her arms sprang out of the saloon and rushed about blindly. Shutters in the first-class cabins closed with a loud clatter. The chief officer hurried past with an anxious look on his face.

The Negro cook appeared at last in the midst of a milling crowd. Using his long arms like flails he was putting up a good fight. His white jacket was bloodstained and torn, and he was retreating toward the companionway. Suddenly he snorted, hissed at his assailants, and in two leaps he was on deck and tearing across it, the whites of his eyes protruding like peeled eggs. "Catch him! Catch him!" cried the Zouaves dashing in pursuit. He climbed out of their reach onto the bridge whence he dived headlong with a flash of his shiny black body into the water. Several minutes later his black head, snorting and spluttering, bobbed up a long distance from the ship.

The engines were stopped. Life-belts were tossed into the sea. The Negro swam alongside and clung to the end of a rope. Grinning broadly he looked up at the heads of the Zouaves hanging over the rail. It was obvious that he would not be beaten now.

The barometer continued to drop. The sky hung overhead like molten lead. The ship's engines throbbed and panted; pulses throbbed in aching heads. And on deck a storm of a different kind was brewing: the soldiers whispered agitatedly

among themselves, ran hither and thither and gathered in knots. A high-pitched, singsong voice (evidently that of a Parisian) announced in panic:

"There's a storm coming. Anybody on deck is sure to be swept into the sea. We won't be allowed even into the saloon. But in the first class there are spring mattresses for profiteers. Silver spittoons for them to vomit into. Are we going to have to die even here for the bourgeoisie? Let's put the profiteers into the hold!"

"Into the hold with the profiteers!" yelled voices. "The rich and the bourgeoisie, into the hold!"

Shouting to one another the Zouaves dashed through both doors into the saloon. But it was empty. On the table stood the remains of an unfinished meal. The doors of the cabins were locked. It was as stuffy here as in an oven where geese are roasted. Some of the soldiers threw themselves on the sofas, wiping off streams of perspiration. The more hot-tempered commenced to bang on the cabin doors:

"Hallo there! Come on, lads, into the hold with you! Get out of your cabins!"

One of the cabin doors which was being battered with a hobnailed boot flew open and Papa-lobster, his purple lips trembling and the sweat pouring down his face, appeared:

"Well! What's all this noise about. What do you want?" he demanded.

Grimy hands were already grabbing at his morning coat, a dozen angry faces and dilated eyes closed in on him. . . . Things might have gone badly with Papa-lobster and his family and trunks had not the boatswain's whistle sounded at that moment. "All hands on deck!" came the command. At the same moment the sky over the ship burst asunder in a thunderclap so deafening that people were stunned. Lightning flashed in all the port-holes, and a piteous whine rose from the rigging. The *Carco-vado* leaned heavily to port as the squall struck the boat squarely.

The sky darkened and the frightened faces of the passengers were white patches in the gloom.

Ragged clouds scudded low over the water. The leaden sea was crested with foam, and the waves rose higher and higher, lashing with increasing ferocity against the rusty sides of the ship. The water was already crashing down on the deck. The lifeboats swung madly on their davits. One of them was torn loose and swept overboard to be tossed wildly in the frothy maelstrom. Perhaps a cask of treasure thrown into the sea or the sacrifice of a bull would have propitiated Neptune! The *Carcovado* creaked and groaned, pitched and rolled, its screws thrashing and smoke belching from its funnels. The gale blew from the southeast and drove the ship toward her native shores.

Paul Torrain sat up among the pillows on his bunk thrilling with excitement. Savagely Neptune struck against the closed porthole with his trident. What a magnificent end to the journey! Paul's eyes glistened with tragic humour! Ah, that was a glorious blow smack against the side! The ship shuddered and listed heavily. Jars and bottles fell from shelves and things rolled over to the cabin door. The cabin stood on end like a swing at the top of its flight. The heart stopped. Would the ship right itself?

"We're lost, we're lost!" cried the nurse, clinging to the bunk supports.

But no, the old tub straightened out. The cabin slid upward and righted itself. The nurse fell on her knees, weeping, to pick up the broken bottles. And again the sovereign of the deep struck the ship's side with his trident.

"Nurse," said Paul, his corpse-like features stretched in a smile, "this is the hurricane of Time that has descended upon us. . . ."

The storm lasted for more than twenty-four hours. Everything on deck was smashed or swept overboard. Two Zouaves were swept overboard. So were the wretched toad's two dogs

and the leather trunks belonging to the sugar manufacturer from Kiev. Someone noticed that the politician with the straw in his beard was missing. He was never found.

The last evening arrived. "Ask the soldiers to carry me on deck, please," Paul said to the nurse.

The Zouaves came; they shook their heads and clicked their tongues in sympathy. Then they picked Paul up together with his mattress and carried him out to a deck chair.

"I wish you luck, my lads," he said.

Over in the west, where the heavy prow of the boat rose and fell, the sun, still wrathful after the storm, was setting in the orange wilderness of sky. As it sank to rest it passed behind a long strip of wispy clouds setting them ablaze with crimson splendour. Reddish shadows flickered over the face of the sun.

The sea was a sombre purple full of unsightly horror. The setting sun was reflected in thick reddish flecks that slid over the water, giving a bloody tinge to the crest of every wave.

But this did not last long. The sun sank and the flecks disappeared. Now the sky was a thing of wondrous beauty. It was as if some unknown planet were approaching the darkened earth, and on this planet were islets set in green and placid waters, bays and rockbound coasts flooded with a glorious, crimson radiance such as occurs only in dreams. There were cities there of fiery gold . . . and winged figures seemed to hover over a green bay.

Paul clung with chilled fingers to the arms of his chair. His heart throbbed with joy. . . . Stay, stay, wondrous vision! . . . But now the contours of his dream city are dimmed. The gold on the shining summits darkens. Continents crumble. . . . And there is nothing left but a fading sunset. . . .

The flame of Paul Torrain's life had flared up for the last time. For a long while afterward his gaze was fixed unseeing on a white star that hung low over the sea, now blazing

forth, now vanishing. It was the Marseilles lighthouse. The ancient road had come to an end. The Zouaves were happily humming songs, tossing their kitbags on their backs and changing their boots. . . . One of them, passing Paul, said in an undertone:

"Someone is going to weep over this one. . . ."

Paul's head drooped. Presently an overpowering chill enveloped him, moving slowly up his legs and to his chest, and then it reached his face. But once again he felt the breath of life: someone was bending over him, someone's cool, trembling lips touched his, and a woman's voice, Lucy's, uttered his name. He was lifted and carried down shaky steps and over creaking planks to the hustling floodlit shore smelling of dust and humanity.





IVAN SUDAREV'S TALES

NOCTURNAL SOLILOQUY IN THE HAY

WE RUSSIANS are great talkers, I don't know why. You'll be lying there on the hay trying to get some sleep and the chap beside you will keep rustling the hay and sighing as if he was yearning for his Ma and the next thing you know he's spouting away about life and death and such things until you finally fall asleep. And then there's the kind that will stop in the middle of a gay conversation to stare at his glass and cough as if his soul had got stuck in his throat, and out of a blue sky he'll begin unburdening himself into your ear. . . .

Of course this war has given a man plenty to think about, more than enough in fact for one natural lifetime. A lot of things our fathers and grandfathers were pretty vague about we've had to clear up for ourselves in a jiffy, as often as not between one bomb explosion and another. And make decisions on the spur of the moment with the help of the gun. . . . You don't get the idea?

My grandfather was a serf in the household of Count Vorontsov. Father was a peasant, a happy-go-lucky sort of chap who spent everything he earned and didn't believe in putting something by for a rainy day; as soon as he'd get some money he would invite his friends and give them a spread—a generous chap he was, but by Christmas the cellar would be stripped bare, not a bit of meat, not a chicken or duck left. But he didn't mind: "Even the grave can be a feather bed to

a man who looks at the bright side of life," he would laugh. "After all, we live only once. . . ." I was terribly fond of my old man. . . . But the Soviet power expected him to take life seriously and my old man took offence; he didn't want to join the collective farm, sold his cow, boarded up the house and went off with my stepmother to the Far East. . . . And I, his son, had to solve a problem of state, and solve it so that the Germans should be scared of me, so that the Germans should get sick to death of our Russian land. . . . Fritz may be a good fighter, but I've got to be a better fighter, I've got to crush him, not him me. . . . He's like a hungry bullock let loose. He murders children. He's a fiend. As for me, when my hand gets numb with the strain of slashing German heads with my sabre, like we did last February, I write verses. . . .

You were right the other day about my writing verse. I even had some of them printed in the army newspaper. . . . "Your feature stories and fighting stuff is pretty good, Sudarev," the editor told me. "But you'd better drop the lyrics. . . ." I suppose he's right, to hell with poetry. I had a notebook where I jotted down my verses but it got lost in the fighting along with Bellerophont, that was a horse I had. . . . I can't get over losing that animal yet. . . . In March I was wounded in both legs but the bone was uninjured; and I persuaded the doctor to let me stay with the squadron instead of going to hospital because I didn't want to leave the horse with nobody to take care of him, so I stayed on and sure enough the wounds healed surprisingly fast. . . . And that Bellerophont, dumb animal though he was, he knew how hard it was for me on those bitter cold days to limp along half-dressed with the pail from the well to the stable. He used to breathe in my face and nuzzle at me. . . . But I've stopped writing verses, I carry my poetry inside of me.

Not long ago I saw a picture in a private house, a small painting it was, nothing specially remarkable except for one

thing: it was a landscape—a woods and a little bit of a river, one of those typically Russian rivers flowing gently between its banks, and beside it a path running into a birch grove. I looked at that painting and it dawned on me all of a sudden—I had lived all these years and yet I could never put anything like that into words. . . . And that artist had painted a path in the woods and painted it so that I could feel every footprint on it, could feel it pulling at my heartstrings, and I knew then that I would willingly die for that path because it was my country. . . . Does this still sound like nonsense to you?

Picture to yourself a village and an old woman sitting outside her cottage, a skinny old creature with a face like death. Only the eyes were still alive. I sat down beside her. It was a sunny day in April, with patches of snow here and there and streamlets trickling. . . .

"Well, grandma," I says, "who's going to win this war, eh?"

"We're going to win . . . the Reds, the Russians."

"Good for you, grandma," I says. "But what makes you so certain?"

The old woman was a long time in replying. She rested her hands on the knob of her stick and stared before her with eyes as black as the night. I was just about to get up and go when she spoke.

"The other day the roosters got to fighting," she said. "A rooster from another yard jumped on ours and started pecking and pecking at him and beating him with his wings. Then he got off and crowed. . . . I thought it was all up with our rooster. But suddenly he ups and gives the attacking bird such a thrashing that he ran away so far his mistress is still looking for him."

That old woman had once been a young girl, she had tripped along the path beside the river, broken off birch twigs and listened to the murmuring of the forest. . . . And now she sat there outside her hut near her journey's end, nothing but

the grave before her, but she wanted her bones to rest in her native soil.

I see you're not going to sleep either. As soon as the ack-acks quiet down we'll drop off. And in the meantime let me tell you a few true stories. I have seen plenty in my time. My horse has drunk the water from many a river on both sides of the front.... If you like the stories you can print them, I don't care either way. It's not fame I'm after....

I

HOW IT BEGAN

The birch logs split like a chunk of glass under the blows of the axe. It was a fine January day; the smoke rose calmly over the snow-clad roofs and melted in a sky of such a celestial blue and with such a gentle haze at the horizon that it seemed impossible the day could be so cold. A low sun hanging over a hoar-coated birch tree completed the picture.

The only thing wrong with it was that right here men were tormenting their own kind. How fine it would be if you could split German heads as easily as this birch log. Vasily Vasilievich was thinking as he wiped his nose with his frost-covered mitten. He lowered his axe and looked around. Along the path that wound hazily across the blue snow from the direction of the village came a lad in a shaggy fur cap. He was sliding along with his padded jacket unbuttoned, swinging his arms to propel himself forward.

Sinking waist-deep into the snow he climbed over the fence into the yard and without offering any greeting snatched off his cap, baring a close-cropped head from which the vapour rose, he produced a blue sheet of paper from inside his hat.

"An airplane dropped it," he said. He picked up the axe and commenced to hack at the knotty log to work off some of his excitement.

The lad's name was Andrei Yudenkov. That spring he had graduated from a Yelnya secondary school of which Vasily Vasilievich had been the principal and had begun to prepare for the university exams when he was drafted into the army and taken prisoner during the ill-starred battles at Vyazma. At that time the old-fashioned conception of warfare, according to which once you were surrounded that meant you had been worsted and might just as well lay down your arms, was still current. But we didn't know as much about the Germans then as we do now, we didn't know that those men who appeared to be carved from stone were apt to crumple up and get hysterical if you struck back at them properly. But you have to pay for knowledge. Andrei Yudenkov had paid all right. He and the other war prisoners were driven into a swamp surrounded by barbed wire and kept there knee-deep in slime for four days under the rain and with nothing to eat. Some of them collapsed under the strain and were swallowed up by the bog. On the fifth day the men, practically at the end of their tether, were driven to the west. Many fell on the way and then shots rang out but no one turned his head at the sound.

Whenever they passed through a village the compassionate eyes of Russian women looked over fences, through half-open gates or through tiny windows at the weary bedraggled crowd of prisoners and stretched out hands holding bread or a piece of cake, while some of the women, waiting until the guard with the tommy gun over his shoulder had passed, would produce earthenware jugs of milk from beneath their shawls and offer it to the men.

On such occasions these men who had foolishly laid down their arms felt the shame cowards must feel, and hatred made the bit of bread stick in their throats. And many of the

stronger ones began running away, choosing the twilight hours before the guards had driven the prisoners into sheds to lock them up for the night. That is what Andrei Yudenkov did. Lagging behind to answer a call of Nature, he waited until the guard's back was turned and darted into the brush where he crawled forward for a long time with bullets spitting all around him. By keeping off the main road he finally made his way to Staraya Buda. Like many others who had escaped before him he knocked at the first door he came to and asked to be taken in. Now, according to the German law anyone who hid a war prisoner was liable to be hanged. A lame man with a grey stubble on a harelip opened the door. "No," he said softly. "We're afraid. You'd better keep going, my friend." He tried a cottage further down and was taken in. An elderly woman who was washing an infant in a bathtub thought for a while, then said: "Very well, you can stay. I'll say you're my son-in-law. I have a girl, and there's the baby here—my eldest daughter's. . . . She's ruined, poor thing, the Germans put her into a brothel. You may as well stay with us. We could do with a strong pair of arms."

There were several other "sons-in-law" like Andrei in the village. They lived with the families that had taken them in and shared their meagre portion of bread. The Russians are a kindly folk. Noskov, the village elder whom the Germans had brought in from another village, was cruel but cowardly and he did not bother to find out whether the men were real sons-in-law or not; he was only interested in seeing that all fire arms were handed over and in collecting, in the name of the German command, all warm clothing, sucklings and fowls the German soldiers had passed up.

After he had been with these people for some time Andrei had some long talks with them. They were all full of bitter hatred for the Germans but they believed that our cause was hopelessly lost: Moscow had been given up long ago, the burgomasters and elders had assured the population, and the

remnants of the Red Army were at their last gasp somewhere in the Urals. . . .

Andrei swung the axe together with the knotty piece of wood over his shoulder and brought it down with a crash against the ground, splitting it in half.

Vasily Vasilievich's burning eyes traveled quickly over the blue slip of paper. A huge fascist army, he read, had been routed all along the Moscow front, it was now in full retreat, abandoning tanks, artillery, cars and strewing the roads and forests with the bodies of its dead. . . . The news was like an eleventh hour reprieve after the death sentence had been pronounced. . . . He went with Andrei into the house and as they passed by the stove where stood a short, stout woman with short grey hair he seized her by the shoulders and turned her round to face him. This was the woman who had taken him in as her nephew.

"Kapitolina Ivanovna," he shouted into her quivering face, "cheer up, and make us some pancakes. . . . I have tremendous news for you. . . . The Russian god is still alive!" He went behind the partition and standing by the table read the blue leaflet aloud once more. He slapped it with his palm and laughed. "Who lost faith in Russia? Eh? Who was going to declare her done for? Russia has indeed arisen!"

Andrei chimed in with an account of how he had heard the roar of an airplane that morning and had rushed outside. Holy Christ, it's ours! It had already passed over and the leaflets were dropping in its wake like pigeons. . . .

"I ran after them sinking up to my belly in snow with the steam fairly rising from me. . . . Why, Vasily Vasilyevich, this changes everything now, doesn't it?"

"Right you are, lad, it does!" cried the school principal. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a revolver covered with grease and a small bag of cartridges. "I don't know how many nights I've lain awake waiting for this

leaflet. I've planned everything. The time for vengeance has come, Andrei! . . ."

"But there are only two of us, with one revolver between us, Vasily Vasilyevich, and two whole companies of them. . . ."

"Well, we've got to make a start sometime. The first man also had the sense to pick up a sharp stone and look where it led him!"

"Yes, but there weren't any tommy guns in those days, Vasily Vasilyevich. All a man needed was a stone axe and some courage. . . ."

"Ah, that's just it! Courage!" Vasily Vasilyevich wagged a skinny finger in front of Andrei's nose. No one had ever seen the school principal like this: his small eyes bored like gimlets into Andrei's face, his gaunt ascetic face with its little goatee was flushed and his teeth were bared in something between a savage grin and a snarl. "We are being put to the test, a great historical test," he said as though he were addressing a thousand Andreis. "Is Russia to be allowed to perish under the Germans or is it the Germans who are going to perish? Our grandfathers have risen from their graves in ancient cemeteries and are waiting for our answer. It is up to us! Russia's sacred land sacked by the Germans is ringing out its appeal. . . . It's a tocsin call! You love Pushkin, don't you? Does he not burn in your heart like a shining star? Is our culture with its honest, forthright peasant wisdom dear to you? We are all to blame for not cherishing it as we should. . . . It is in the nature of the Russian to be wasteful. . . . Never mind. Russia is great, she is mighty and enduring. . . . And do you know what kindness there is in the Russian soul; what gentleness there is beneath the calico kerchief! What selflessness!"

When his passion had spent itself Vasily Vasilyevich's eyes softened. But Andrei's grey wide-opened eyes, on the contrary, turned cold and grim and his young face with its impudent nose looked drawn.

"And now to business," Vasily Vasilyevich said, "We'll begin by going to Staraya Buda tonight."

The moon, encircled by a pale rainbow-hued halo, stood high over the white snowy expanses darkened by the shadow of an occasional gnarled pine tree or solitary stove pipe sticking out of some charred ruin. Vasily Vasilyevich could barely keep pace with Andrei whose felt-booted feet slid lightly over the icy ruts. Presently Andrei raised his hand and paused—somewhere ahead of them a dog howled. They turned off on to the virgin snow and panting with exertion came up to the village from the side of the threshing barn at the end of the village and hid in its shadow. The black windows of the cottages looked twisted in the moonlight. In the distance a truck backfired noisily and the sound of staccato foreign speech was heard.

"The Fritzes have brought canned goods and vodka," said Andrei, "we'll wait."

When the noises had subsided Andrei vaulted over the fence.

"Follow me quickly," he said giving a legup to Vasily Vasilyevich who had got himself entangled in his long coat.

They climbed on to the porch and knocked at the door.

"*Starosta*," Andrei called, "some officers here are asking for you."

And when the frosty boards creaked within. Vasily Vasilyevich said in German:

"Come outside, I want you."

"Right away, sir, right away," came the hasty whisper from the other side of the door. The bolt was slipped back. The door opened a crack and in the light of the moon a pocked face with a sharp nose and a servile expression looked out.

Andrei leapt at the door and threw himself inside and a scuffle sounded from within. Vasily Vasilyevich could not make out what was happening at first with all that panting, rolling and gasping going on at his feet. But after a while he

saw the *starosta* sitting on top, his shoulder blades working, and so he struck the man on the back of the head with his revolver. . . .

"Sons-of-bitches," the *starosta* groaned.

It was very warm in the room with the shuttered windows. The lamp was burning low; a postcard portrait of Hitler in naval uniform had been pinned up over the oilcloth couch from which the *starosta* had just risen, throwing off his sheepskin jacket and dropping his dirty calico pillow onto the floor in his haste. On the bare table, beside a bottle of ink and an open office ledger, lay a brand new tommy gun—the very thing they had come for.

"Now you will agree that we are already quite well armed?" asked Vasily Vasilyevich with a mocking smile that twisted his little beard to one side. "You take the tommy gun, I'll take the book and let's go to Lyonka Vlasov."

For the sake of precaution they carried the *starosta* out of the porch into the shed and threw him behind the woodpile. The moon in its shimmering halo shone down on the slumbering village as in some magic fairy tale when by rights it should have risen crimson-hued like a bleeding heart, red-hot like hate. . . .

"Why do you keep looking up?" said Andrei. "Don't worry, the air is still. Follow me, there's no dog here to jump at you."

Lyonka Vlasov, a man with a grim face and powerful neck, came out to them in the frost barefoot, with his thin shirt flapping loosely around him. Examining the tommy gun he listened to their brief report about the leaflet and the need for immediate partisan action. When his teeth began to chatter he said: "Come inside. This is serious. We'll have to send for the boys. . . ."

Inside the dark cottage with its strong odour of poverty they spoke in whispers, pausing when the women began to stir behind the partition. In the dim light that broke through

the frost-covered windowpanes they saw one of the women emerge, slipping her arms into the sleeves of her fur jacket; Lyonka whispered something to her and she went over to the stove and called out in a young voice, "Vanya, hand me my *valenki*, please." rose, thrust her feet into the felt boots and hurried outside. Vasily Vasilyevich was about to expound the same ideas he had advanced previously to Andrei but Lyonka stopped him abruptly:

"The only affective propaganda now is fighting. If we can destroy one garrison at least, we'll have ten villages with us at once. But we must have weapons."

"Vanya," he called, "get dressed and come here."

A boy slid off the stove and came over to the adults, raising a pair of large eyes to them. Vasily Vasilyevich laid his hand on the boy's warm soft hair, but the lad moved aside as much as to say: this is no time for caresses.

"We need weapons," Lyonka said to him.

"Yes."

"Are there any abandoned arms around here? You boys ought to know everything."

"Sure there are. Arkady knows more about it than I do, he'll tell you. Do you need an anti-tank gun? There's two of them in the river. We know where the shells are too. And there's eleven machine guns buried in a hole in the forest. And some hand grenades and mines in another place. We'll show you everything. Why, what's up—going to take a swipe at the Germans?"

"Now, that's none of your business, my lad."

"Sure it's my business," said the boy in a gruff adult voice as he hitched up his trousers. "And you needn't worry, I wouldn't squeal, not even if they tortured me."

Vasily Vasilyevich bent down to get a better look at the lad—it was a child's face, round and chubby, the lips full, but the expression was too serious for a child. Five army men came into the cottage one after another and behind them

the girl who had gone to fetch them. She took off her shawl and retired behind the partition. Vasily Vasilyevich went over to the window and re-read the leaflet.

Andrei said that it was a call to arms.

"So things are beginning to move at last," said one of the army men. "Good. It's time the Germans had a taste of it. . . . Come on, let's go and look for weapons. . . ."

That night a partisan detachment of eight men, not counting the two boys acting as scouts, was formed under the very noses of the Germans. Vanya and the other lad, Arkady, a knowing little chap, led the partisans armed with spades into the dark forest and showed them where to dig. In a hole under a pile of snow and brushwood they found the machine guns, four of them in perfect condition. Not far away in another hole they found a crate of grenades and about twenty mines. The boys tried to persuade them to go after the two anti-tank guns that were buried under the ice at the river bottom and even volunteered to dive for them.

"You just break a hole in the ice for us and we'll jump in and get them. We don't mind the cold water."

But it was decided to leave the guns for another time. While it was still dark they moved the weapons to Vasily Vasilyevich's house in the village. All they needed now was a few rifles.

The following morning he was out chopping wood, again humming: "Winter thou wert cold and drear. . . ." when over the snowy field came Vanya on skis. By day he did not look quite so tiny, snub nosed and grave as he had the night before.

"The Germans have gotten the wind up," he reported. "Found Noskov, the *starosta*, in the woodshed. Now they've started a house-to-house search and are beating up everybody. An awful fuss. At Fedyunin's place they took one of the babies and dashed its brains out against the doorpost. All our kids have run away to the forest. And that boy who was

with us—I don't know whether he's lying or not—anyhow he says he understands a bit of German and he heard them say they're expecting some trucks tonight.... What else do you want to know? Tell me, I'll find out."

"Go to Kapitolina Ivanovna and tell her to give you some hot pancakes."

That night a column of German trucks struck a mine-field some ten kilometres outside of Staraya Buda. As soon as the first car leapt into the air from the explosion, machine guns began to rattle from the woods. The Germans had nowhere to hide: on either side of the road the snow was impassable. There were (as was later ascertained) twenty-seven of them: they rushed back and forth beside the trucks screaming wildly, shooting haphazardly and falling. A man in a dark overcoat and another with a tommy gun rushed out of the dark shadows onto the moonlit road. "Hurrah!" shouted the man raising his hands. Whereupon the partisans came running from behind the snow hills hurling grenades.

It was all over in a few minutes. The six trucks, not counting the first one which was burned, were found to contain rifles, ammunition, food and blankets. The partisans took everything they could make use of and set fire to the rest along with the trucks.

The following morning Vasily Vasilyevich was chopping wood again. Quite a few people passed by the deserted farmhouse that day. And each one on sighting the school principal coughed or otherwise made his presence known, and then cautiously made his way by a roundabout path to the principal's cottage. A week later the partisan detachment commanded by Vasily Vasilyevich Kozubsky numbered more than two hundred men and two guns, and preparations were launched for a major operation—the destruction of the German garrison in Staraya Buda.

II

THE SEVEN GRIMY ONES

A large cavalry unit broke through the front to the aid of the partisans. The break-through itself was simple enough—the Germans were deceived by a feint at one point while our main forces crossed the highway at another. But the march through the forest thickets in a forty-degree frost was incredibly difficult. The horses sank up to their bellies in the snow; the cavalymen had to dismount and tamp down the snow and cut a path through the trees for the sleds and guns; at night the men, worn out by the day's march, dropped down exhausted in the snow and slept without bothering to light fires.

By the seventh day of the march it was obvious that the men had to be given a chance to warm up. Five German-occupied villages scattered on the banks of a river within a short distance from one another were selected for the halt. The commanding general ordered them to be taken swiftly and noiselessly before the enemy should have time to set fire to the houses and in such a way as to make sure that not a single German escaped.

During that night the villages were surrounded and the roads straddled. With the blizzard howling as if all the wood sprites had come to the aid of the Russians, the dismounted cavalymen charged into the sleeping villages along with flurries of snow. Five green flares fired one after the other pierced the scudding snow clouds announcing that the order had been fulfilled.

The general dismounted beside a porch whose elaborate carving was lit up by the glow from the flaming rafters of the houses opposite; a German lay face downward beside the porch as though staring through the earth, his green coat already covered with snow. The general entered the hut and stamped on the floor with his frozen boots. A woman in a

dark shawl with a pale, lined face glanced at him with vacant eyes, her lips moving in silent prayer. . . .

"How about putting on the samovar," said the general, tossing his cape onto a bench. He removed his fur jacket and sat down under the holy image, rubbing his hands which were swollen from the cold. "And it might be a good thing to heat up the bath as well."

The woman nodded briefly and went behind the partition, evidently to force back the scream that rose to her lips.

Officers came into the hut out of the cold, all in high spirits; they saluted the general smartly and answered his questions gaily. Every now and then the general touched his palm to his burning cheeks with their stubble of beard—he felt his face swelling from the warmth like a balloon. And the general was particular about his appearance. "Damn it, I've got to catch up with seven nights' sleep. . . ." he said to himself.

The samovar was brought in by a tall lad whose face was covered with deep purple scars and whose brown eyes smiled softly as he blew off the ashes, placed the samovar on the table and commenced to fill the teapot.

"Is that your mother?" the general asked. "What's the matter with her?"

"She can't get over those Germans," the lad replied smartly. "They're a terribly excitable crowd. She says her ears are still ringing with their yells."

"Maybe the Germans are excitable, maybe the Russians are," said the general gravely, his fingers pressed against the hot glass of tea.

"But that's beside the point. Are there many escaped war prisoners like yourself around here?"

The scarred lad hung his head and let his hands droop, and a barely audible sigh escaped him as he replied:

"We're not to blame, Comrade Major General. We got stuck behind the Germans, between their first and second

lines, on September eleventh it was.... And so, we scattered...."

"And it never occurred to any of you to make an attempt to fight your way through?... Shame on you!" (The youngster's arm clinging to his side trembled visibly.) "All right, go and heat the bathhouse and we'll talk about this tomorrow."

The next morning the general, having washed in the bathhouse and slept his fill, emerged clean-shaven and trim again onto the porch. As he came out of the warm cottage the frost made him catch his breath. Beside the porch where dark patches of blood showed in the fresh snow from which the German bodies had been removed, stood the scarred youngster with six others of about eighteen or nineteen years. They stood smartly at attention when the general appeared.

"Aha, the troops!" said the general, walking over to them. "Runaway prisoners of war? Afraid of having to answer for it, eh? The Red Army isn't in the Urals after all, the Red Army came to you by itself.... Well, what have you to say for yourselves? Surrendered your arms to the enemy, eh? Willing to fetch water and clean latrines for him, eh?"

And he said some more bitter, cutting things. The lads stood silent, tears dimmed the eyes of one, and an obstinate line stood between the brows of another. They were all dressed shabbily, in old sheepskin coats or short jackets, and one wore a woman's padded jacket.

"So you exchanged your Red Army uniform for a woman's comforter! Exchanged honour for disgrace! What's the use of men like you!" the general went on in a stern voice, pacing up and down in front of the youngsters. "Fighting Germans isn't plucking chickens, you know.... Very well, you can name your own punishment. Any of you want to speak?"

A sturdy lad with watery blue eyes and a stubborn wrinkle over his short nose stepped forward:

"We know that we've done wrong and we don't blame

anyone for what we did. We're very glad you've come and we ask you to give us a chance to settle scores with the fascists...." He jerked his head toward a thick-lipped youngster who was staring at the general with a smile of joy and amazement. "That's Konstantin Kostin, we found his sister Mavrunya hanging by her leg in the forest with her stomach ripped open.... We all knew her and when we found her hanging there we saw red.... So we're not going to carry water for any fascists...."

"Comrade Major General," said Konstantin Kostin, "you have no tanks in your unit. We know where there are some abandoned tanks, we can dig them out and repair them. We're tankists...."

"What do you say?" the general asked the scarred lad.

"He's right about the tanks. There's a KV not far from here in the swamp and two medium tanks. And we know where to find some more. The Germans tried to haul them out, mobilized whole villages to do the work, but had to give it up. But we know how to get them out. Of course the folks around here have carried off most of the parts. It'll be a difficult repair job. But I'm a driver-mechanic. See all those scars on my face? I got burned a couple of times. But I pulled through."

"Good. We'll think about it," said the general. "In the meantime run along and get yourselves some decent army coats to wear. I don't care even if they're German."

After a day's rest the cavalry regiment moved on into an area which was a theatre of constant fighting, for there were a large number of small partisan detachments and paratroops operating there. The situation that prevailed there could be likened to a "layer cake." Not a night passed but some village would be surrounded by partisans who crept up through the deep snow. The sentry with the collar of his sheepskin coat raised higher than his helmet would fall to the ground with a faint cry under some knife blow. The

partisans would then rush into the stuffy huts filled with sleeping Germans. Those Germans who contrived to escape from this hell of rifle shots, screams and blows onto the street did not get very far—some would be felled by bullets, others by Jack Frost, who had descended from the realm of make-believe to engage in the business of freezing Germans. The forest roads soon became impassable. Only heavily guarded mobile columns could use the highways with any safety, and even they not always. Traffic on the railway ceased, for the line was jammed with locomotives and cars that had fallen foul of mines and now stood on end, one atop the other. The Germans lost their heads amid this "infernal Russian chaos."

Moving along a broad front the cavalry regiments hounded the German garrisons and by the end of March they helped the partisans to unite several districts under the Soviet flag. The people took heart. Everywhere there was a hunt for weapons, villages were fortified, and girls armed with rifles stood on sentry duty. But at last the long winter came to an end, icicles hung from the roofs, scrawny rooks arrived and hovered with piteous cries over last year's nests. It was at this time that the Germans in the western and northern part of the territory were rumoured to be drawing up large forces. The general sent his men to find out whether those seven young tankists had accomplished anything since he last saw them.

The seven tankists had kept their word. They had begun with a drum of German gasoline about which they had said nothing at the time to the general. Then they overhauled two German tractors and repaired one Soviet tractor the farmers had driven into a pond. The previous autumn German tanks had surrounded a Soviet KV whose driver, instead of fighting his way through or dying in the attempt, had made for the forest, crashing through the stand of venerable pines until he sank into a swamp up to his turret.

With picks and axes the seven youngsters dug into the frozen earth down to the tank, laid logs in front of the fighting machines—there was plenty of timber lying around after the fruitless efforts of the Germans to budge the sunken tank—hitched the 100-ton steel fortress with its own chains to the three repaired tractors and hauled it out of the mire. After which they sat down and had a smoke—for the first time in two days and three nights—and dropped in the snow and fell asleep. Later on they hauled the tank to the village and stood it in a shed. Then the real work began.

There was no carburetor on the engine, all the spark plugs had to be replaced, the piston rings were a mess, all the optical instruments had been stolen, the gun barrel had been shot through by an anti-tank bullet, but the worst of it all was that there were no tools to work with, not even a spanner, and the tank was such a ruin that even a decently-equipped machine shop would have had a hard time putting it to rights. The tankists were quite downhearted.

"We promised the general and now we won't be able to do anything," said thick-lipped Konstantin Kostin.

"Who the hell was to know!" Fedya Ivolgin turned on him angrily. "I'd like to know what long-handed bastard took that carburetor? What did he want it for? To cook shchi in or what?"

They were sitting around the tank in the windy shed into which the blizzard swept a mound of powdery snow that glistened like sugar.

"The bearings in the turret will have to be changed too," said the turret gunner, a slim dark-haired lad whose face in spite of the moustache looked like a girl's. "And what'll we do about that hole in the gun barrel? Stick our fingers in it?"

"Have you finished blubbering, comrades?" asked the lad with the watery blue eyes that now had a hard glint in them. It was Sashka Samokhvalov, a technician from Moscow. "I'm beginning to be sorry I got myself in with such a crowd of

snivelers." He got up and thrust his hands into the pockets of the German overcoat that reached down to his ankles. "Now get this straight—you have three weeks to repair this crocodile. That will mean hauling the two medium tanks out of the swamp—we ought to be able to take some parts from them. If we don't, we'll go around the village from house to house until we find all the missing parts. The peasants have everything hidden away, you may be sure. Anyone who doesn't agree with me I propose branding a traitor. . . ."

The tankists listened in silence, watching the wind billow the skirts of his German overcoat.

"Well, it isn't quite as bad as all that, my boy," said grimy Fedya Ivolgin, "but on the whole you're right, of course."

They rose, picked up their picks and axes and began to crank up the tractors. Pulling the medium tanks out of the swamp proved much easier. They, too, were hauled in under the shed. The three tankists—Ivolgin, Samokhvalov and Kostin—took the engines apart. Four of the others went to the village to look for tools and various parts, and sure enough in the house of one peasant, a smith who had the reputation of being a bit of an idler, they found all three carburetors among a pile of rusty locks and primus burners.

The smith came to the barn where the tanks stood. Gusar was his name, a tall, sinewy fellow, erect of bearing in spite of his age, with a mocking expression on his wrinkled face and a bulbous shiny nose that betrayed a weakness for the bottle. He listened with a sarcastic smile while the tankists told him what tools had to be obtained or made at once.

"Hm, interestin'," he said, "very interestin' indeed. Wanted to put me on the shelf long ago, but now the artisan has his uses, eh?"

The next day he brought a few spanners so well made that the tankists were amazed.

"Is this really your work, Gusar?" they asked.

"Interestin'," returned the other bitingly, "interestin' to hear your opinion about a Russian. . . . An artisan working on his own, a drunk. . . . Sure. . . . A man who can drink and keep his head is worth two of the other kind. . . . No, comrades, you shouldn't be in such a hurry to pass judgment on a Russian."

Gusar worked like a fiend. He was clever too, remarkably so. He drove the farm horses to the steam-powered flour mill which had been burned down by the Germans and brought back steel girders and iron gears and used them to build a crane. Using this and the tractor they lifted the turret off the tank. He went around the neighbouring villages on skis and managed to pick up an acetylene torch and some German oxygen tanks. And it was he who hit upon the simple but ingenious idea of using anti-tank shells to trim the rough edges in the bore of the gun where it had been damaged. After the second shell had been fired the barrel was smooth again; and when they filled the hole with steel plugs to prevent the gas from escaping and covered it over with a bandage made from a rubber hose the gun was as good as if it had just come from the factory.

In the meantime the tankists had hauled another four light tanks into the shed. By now all the villages knew what was going on and the collective farmers combed the swamps in the neighbourhood in search of ammunition and tanks. Not a day passed but some sled would drive up to the shed with the steam rising from the mangy nag which even the Germans had scorned to take, and on top of the sled would sit some old peasant with icicles hanging from his whiskers and a stern look in his round, aged eyes under their wrinkled brows, and beside him his grandson, a perky little urchin, would address the smoke and oil begrimed tankists in a childish pipe:

"We've brought some forty-five millimetre shrapnel shells. Where d'you want us to put them?"

By the time the general's messenger came to the village, forges were smoking under the roof of the shed, the dazzling blue flame of the acetylene welder hissed loudly and hammers pounded against steel; one medium and two light tanks stood ready for battle; the treads of the KV had been repaired and the engine was belching blue smoke from its exhaust pipe.

"You can tell the Major General that the only thing that's holding us up now are crews to man the tanks," Sashka Samokhvalov told the thin-lipped lieutenant. "Ask him to send some good drivers, mechanics and turret gunners. And he'd better hurry up with the fuel. We haven't any optical instruments, the Germans removed them all, just have to do without them. Better make a note of that too. And while you're fussing with all that we'll have another couple of crocodiles ready for you."

The lieutenant jotted down everything in his notebook, expressing neither surprise nor pleasure, shook hands with the seven grimy ones and Gusar, climbed into his liaison plane and took off.

At last came spring with its rushing waters that flooded the fields and forests, swelled the streams and submerged ravines so that war was out of the question. The collective farmers busied themselves with preparations for the sowing. The girls with rifles over their shoulders who stood at village outskirts bored by guard duty stared up with wrinkled brows at the flocks of migrant birds. The general ordered as many books as possible to be brought from the local libraries to keep the cavalrymen occupied. But all the libraries for three hundred versts around had been destroyed by the Germans—it was remarkable how they had had the patience to burn so many books. All that could be found was a dogeared copy of Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward*. The general read it in one night, lying without boots and tunic on the bench under the window, listening to heavy raindrops falling in the whitish haze outside and the roosters crowing all over the village. Afterwards the

book made the rounds of the platoons and squadrons to be read aloud.

But the time came when the ground dried and the Germans, feeling that they had not done enough to torment Russian people, not burned enough villages and towns nor slaughtered enough cattle, moved on the "country bumpkins" with dozens of battalions and hundreds of tanks. But as distinct from the previous autumn, the "country bumpkins" now had well-organized, well-armed partisan regiments, and unlike the autumn, everyone was now familiar with the character of the Germans whose sole purpose was to kill off as many Russians as possible.

Fighting flared up along the entire front. The general's cavalry regiments hurried to the aid of the partisans whenever their positions were threatened. These were regiments of Ukrainians and Don, Kuban, Terek and Siberian Cossacks who had covered themselves with glory in the December and January fighting. They knew their four commandments well: never to consider themselves surrounded by the enemy; to be able to extricate themselves from any situation however hopeless it might seem; to fight to the last bullet and never to surrender alive; to cherish their weapons and never abandon them even unto death.

Day and night the German planes roared over the villages and settlements, almost touching the thatched roofs, bombing and strafing everything living; Nazi tanks rattled over all the highways and lanes. The task was to wipe out the Germans, to put up such a resistance as to make the Germans curse the day they set foot on Russian soil.

During one of the first battles, twelve German tanks advanced in close formation along a highway. The Hitlerites were trying to trap a group of partisans and the tanks were being sent to attack them from the rear. To the right of them ancient pines whispered in the fresh May breeze, to the left spread a dense alder grove. Suddenly out of the rustling leaves a gun volley

was fired and the head tank stopped dead in its tracks with a hole in its side, vomiting a cloud of smoke. A second shell hit the tread of another tank. The Germans clanged their hatches to and with their machine guns spitting turned into the thickets where they believed the partisans lay in ambush with a gun. But imagine their surprise when out of the alder bushes, trampling them underfoot like a wild boar run amok, emerged the rusty hulk of a KV. This was the last place the Germans might have expected to encounter a Soviet tank, especially one of those monsters that no shells could pierce.

Lurching heavily, the KV rolled out onto the highway, fired almost point-blank at the third tank which blew up, climbed at full speed onto the fourth and crushed it with a sickening crash along with the Germans inside it. The surviving German tanks turned and crawled away beyond the bend of the road. The turret hatch on the KV opened and Sashka Samokhvalov, Fedya Ivolgin and Lyosha Rakitin, the one who looked like a girl with whiskers, jumped down onto the road, all oil-begrimed and excited. . . .

"That son-of-a-gun Gusar," cried Sashka Samokhvalov, "of course the engine's gone screwy! Come on, let's take the carburetors out of those German tanks."

While this was happening Ivan Sudarev's squadron, fighting on foot, was holding back the Germans on the steep bank of a river. The air was filled with the whining and explosions of German mortar shells, and in front of the slit trenches where the cavalrymen were the earth boiled and seethed under the thick rain of explosive bullets; shrapnel tore through the air, and the huge-winged shadows of bombers hovered overhead. The entire riverbank trembled as they dropped their loads, sending up spouts of earth which struck loudly against the helmets and backs of the men. The German infantry had already begun to emerge from the shrubs along the river's edge, soldiers, with nothing but their shirts on, splashing through the water.

It was at this point that two of the tanks the grimy lads had repaired—a medium tank and a light one—came to Ivan Sudarev's rescue. They hung over the edge of the cliff overlooking the river. In a few minutes many a German corpse was floating slowly down with the current. Ivan Sudarev led his squadron out of the slit trenches and the Russians came dashing down the cliff at the German infantrymen who had already managed to wade or row across to our side.

The light tank was lost in the battle—that was the first casualty of Samokhvalov's "tank battalion." The medium tank ran out of ammunition and went back to the woods to reload. The cases of shells lay in a hole covered with branches. Konstantin Kostin and two of his grimy comrades had begun hauling out the crates and were busy loading them into the tank, shouting to one another at the top of their voices, when German Tommy guns suddenly opened up at them from all sides, the bullets ricocheting against the armour of the tank. And so the grimy ones squatted in the hole, opened up the crates and handed the shells through the engine hatch to a fourth tankist seated inside. Meantime the German Tommy gunners came closer; the lads could see them running from tree to tree. The three grimy ones finished loading the shells and leapt nimbly onto the treads and in through the hatch. Konstantin Kostin came last diving in head first. The hatch was closed and the tank dashed off in pursuit of the Tommy gunners. One of them, an officer, was captured and taken to headquarters.

Such was the first battle fought by the "seven grimy ones" as they were later called. The general spoke to Samokhvalov on the phone and personally thanked him and his comrades for their valour. The grimy ones took this to mean that their country had forgiven them.

III

NINA

The stronger a man is, the coarser and simpler his life, the more sensitive he is. . . . Don't you agree? They say Ivan Sudarev has no feelings. That's nonsense. There are times when painful memories take possession of you, and you go off by yourself somewhere and lie down in the grass. The wind sways the grass above your head and you can see the edge of the sky as you lie there with your heart beating against the earth, mother earth, who takes the weary wayfarer to her bosom. . . .

I can remember one incident that occurred early in the war. You know yourself without my telling you what a fine mess our border troops found themselves in when our airfields were bombed to hell on the first day of the war. Some folks in the rear still say that the Red Army units took to their heels at that time. But that is an insult to the unknown graves where the country's loyal sons lie buried, for they paid with their lives for our victory. They took some of the insolent swagger out of the Germans before they fell. We retreated but we fought every inch of the way, shooting at the enemy until the barrels of our machine guns and rifles got red hot. They swooped down on us with their innumerable tanks and Tommy gunners, they bombed and shelled us as much as they pleased. We fought our way through and got out. We lost heavily but so did the Germans.

I admit there were some fainthearted men among us, the kind who would lie there more dead than alive during an air raid and when it was over, get up, shake themselves and curse the Germans weakly. That was the kind that gave themselves up. But there was another reason. We had been taught many things but not all of us had learned that in battle every soldier must use his own initiative. We kept our eyes on the commander. He was responsible for everything. And if he got killed? . . .

We lost our bearings.... And that was the undoing of many units.... We learned to use our own initiative after that. Our soldiers have good heads on their shoulders and they're darn good fighters.... Our pride was badly hurt at that time. We looked forward to coming to grips with the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting as we might look forward to some holiday.

We had advanced beyond the Nieman, and had lost contact with the main body of our forces in the process. And before we knew it the Germans were hemming us in from all sides. We got busy and dug narrow slit trenches and lay low in them. We didn't even have any armour-piercing bullets. So there we were with mines exploding all around us and wave after wave of airplanes overhead; the earth groaned from the explosions, the air was filled with dust and the acrid stench of smoke, and sand filled our eyes and ears. Now and again one of those German bastards would dive down to spray us with machine-gun bullets, flying so low that we could even see his doughy white face.

And we sat there in our trenches and took it. Remember what I told you before about our commandments? Well, we just wouldn't admit that we were surrounded and that was all there was to it. So there was nothing left for the Germans to do but come and get us, but that meant hand-to-hand fighting which they hated like poison. And sure enough after a while everything quieted down, not a single shot, and no airplanes about. The silence was such we could actually hear the forest rustling again. We stuck our heads out of the trench and got a last glimpse of a huge red sun just about to set in a cloud.

Taking those of the wounded who could still manage to carry a rifle and move their limbs somehow, we made our way cautiously toward the woods where we knew a group of their tommy gunners with machine guns had taken up positions. We crawled forward on all fours, hugging the ground and hiding behind the humps trying to get as close as possible

without being observed so as to take them by surprise. But although we were close enough for them to see us nothing happened.

It gave me cold shivers, I remember, waiting for them to begin firing. Hell, we were no more than fifty yards from them by now and still they gave no sign. Using a birch tree for cover, I stood up and looked around. There was no movement at the edge of the woods. Must be some sort of trap, I thought. And just then rifles began to crackle deep inside the woods over to the right of where we were. Tracer bullets, blue, red and green, stitched the sky. And when we heard the good old Russian "Hurrah!" our mouths dropped open with surprise and the next moment we were on our feet yelling "Hurrah!" at the top of our voices. We ran past the place where the German tommy gunners had been earlier in the day and pushed on into the thickets. At last we found them and we let them have it good and proper....

This is what had happened. Part of a company, that had been cut off from its regiment, making its way east under the command of a Lieutenant Moiseyev, had found out about our plight and, being in the neighbourhood, had decided to come to our rescue. They had struck at the Germans from the rear, making a breach for us in the enemy lines.

Moiseyev was a hot-tempered man, a born soldier. We never did find out who he was, but I believe he had served somewhere in Western Byelorussia. He was sturdily built, of medium height, with a rather ordinary face; he wore the sleeves of his tunic rolled up over the elbow and was always laughing good-humouredly but his eyes had a keen piercing look in them. Yes, we have some fine people in Russia.

Well, together with Moiseyev's company we fought our way to the east. As we advanced we hunted up Germans, attacking garrisons left behind in villages by their advance units, or some paratroopers. We always attacked first and

kept them on the run. We hadn't shaved for weeks and our faces were black but whether from dirt or hatred I couldn't say. Moiseyev would say jokingly that with an army of men like us you could march down the streets of Berlin to music and scare all the German women....

One day near a small station that had been occupied by the Germans a short while before and abandoned by them along with a wrecked train, we found the body of a young woman lying on the moist green grass of a meadow that had not seen the haymaker's scythe for a long time. One hand was bent behind her head, and the other was pressed against a bullet wound in her breast. Her eyelids were lowered and the breeze played with her chestnut hair, and you might have thought her asleep if it hadn't been for a trickle of blood that oozed from the corner of her pale mouth. A little black-eyed girl of about two, in a polka dot dress, crawled on the grass beside the woman shaking her by the arm and saying over and over again: "Mamma's sleeping, Mamma's sleeping...." As we came up the child moved closer to its mother and covered the woman's cheeks with its tiny palms, staring up at us like a frightened little sparrow.

"What's the trouble, there, comrades?" Moiseyev came running up tearing at the collar of his tunic. We moved aside in silence. He stopped short and then, as if talking to himself, he said dazed-like: "It's my wife, my own wife and daughter...." He picked up the child and pressed her to him, then he dropped down beside his wife and burst into tears like a baby. The little girl, who had been quiet till then, began to cry.

The men moved away in silent sympathy. I took Moiseyev's revolver from him and we went off to dig a grave under three young birch trees, leaving him alone for a while with his child.

His wife must have fled from her home in Belostok with the little girl, making her way mostly on foot or perhaps

traveling part of the way by train or truck. Reaching this small station shortly before we got there, she had been caught in a German air raid. I could picture her running across the green meadow in terror. What a perfect target she must have made for those German flyers, those yellow whelps, whose favourite sport is to dive down and chase women and children running panic-stricken for safety. And in another hour, perhaps, she might have met her husband....

We dug the grave under the birch trees, we intended it for one body, but as it happened we buried two there. One of our scouts came galloping up on a steaming horse to report that a group of German motorcyclists had been sighted on the highway that crossed the railway line not far from this station. We could have got away without any trouble. But Moiseyev came up at that moment with the child in his arms; his face had turned ashen and his eyes were lustreless. "No," he said, "I'm against withdrawing. I want to give them a proper reception.... It's the only way, comrades, the only way." He stroked the little girl's hair and gave her to one of the men who had a head wound, then turned to me and said sternly: "Give me back my revolver at once."

Moiseyev conducted the operation himself. He barricaded a narrow section of the road with logs, set up an ambush of machine gunners and riflemen and when the Germans came blithely along and stopped at the barricade in surprise, he waited until the entire column was drawn up and then wiped them out to the last man with rifle fire and bayonets. I don't know whether he sought death in that battle or whether his wrath and hatred blinded him to the danger, at any rate he was in the thick of the fighting all the time. His whole stomach was riddled with tommy gun bullets. But he had the strength to sit up on the road and survey the scene of the slaughter: "There you are, Marusya," he said, his mind must have been wandering a bit by then, "that'll be your wake, we'll bury you with music..." He fell over onto his left side and with a

hand already turning blue dragged his revolver out of its holster. His stomach was sliced nearly in two....

We buried them both in the same grave. The little girl, in the arms of the soldier with the wounded head, did not cry, but the expression on her little face was not that of a child as she watched us burying her mother and father. Perhaps she didn't really understand what it was all about. But I have a hunch that she did, the children of this war understand much more than we think. There's a lot inside those little heads of theirs that will mature in time....

That evening while resting in the forest we heated water in our helmets and washed our little girl; we wrapped her up in a cape and made her a little nest out of twigs and assigned Matvei Makhotkin, a husky fierce-looking border-guard, to watch over her. The little girl slept badly, she kept waking up and calling for her mother. And each time she woke Matvei would say: "Sleep, sleep, don't be scared..." But the next day she was quiet. Matvei wouldn't trust her to anyone, he carried her about in his arms everywhere and finally got her to tell him her name. For a long time she refused to say, then one day she suddenly whispered it in his ear: "Nina."

For many days after that we pushed on to the east through the German line, and when at last we came close to the front lines we decided not to risk the child's life any more. At the little town of Nemirovo we entrusted our little girl to the care of a woman named Rina Mikhailchuk. We took a liking to her and felt that she would be good to the child. We gave her all the sugar and biscuits we had as a "dowry." When we left Nemirovo we looked in to the cottage to say good-bye. Nina was dancing gaily in her adopted mother's arms, and the woman was weeping silently.... Well, that's the whole story....

Our Ninochka is over there in the west where the Germans are. And so is that grave under the birch trees....

IV

A STRANGE STORY

There they came! They crawled along in single file—one, another, a third—marked with a white circle like a cat's eye, and with a black cross. Standing behind Pyotr Filippovich, Praskovya Savishna crossed herself. He had jumped onto the bench at the window and pressed his face against the pane, as soon as the tanks rumbled up. When Praskovya Savishna crossed herself he wheeled about and gave an almost toothless sneer into his wiry little beard. Huge trucks filled with soldiers sitting in even rows followed the tanks down the muddy village street. From under their deep helmets the Germans stared vacantly into the grey drizzle, their faces grey, lifeless and morose.

The noise of the passing column died away. Then the faint peals of thunder could be heard once again. Pyotr Filippovich turned away from the window. His eyes were puckered with laughter and, barely visible through narrowed lids, had a strange gleam. Praskovya Savishna said:

"Lord, what a fright! Well, Pyotr Filippovich, perhaps we'll be somebody now?"

He did not reply. He sat tapping with his fingernails on the table—a small man with broad nostrils and sparse red hair. Praskovya Savishna would have liked to say something about their house, but timidity sealed her lips. She had always been afraid of her husband, ever since the day in 1914 when she had been taken from her poor family into his rich household. With the years she seemed to have become used to it. But that spring, when Pyotr Filippovich returned after having served a ten-year sentence, she again began to fear him, though she herself could not say why. He did not beat her or swear at her—but he sneered at everything she did, and he always spoke in riddles. Nobody in the house

had ever read books before; but now he borrowed newspapers from the village library and used up kerosene reading books. He had brought eyeglasses from the North for that purpose.

Praskovya Savishna began to prepare dinner without having spoken her mind; she chopped up some cabbage and onions, poured out watery kvass and angrily summoned the children. They had mouldy toast with their dinner: the grain, flour and smoked goose and pork had all been hidden away from German eyes, just to make sure. Before picking up his spoon Pyotr Filippovich stretched his arms out of his sleeves, bent them at the elbow and stroked his hair—a habit of his father's. When he thrust his arms out Praskovya Savishna suddenly said, with feminine inconsistency:

"They've torn down the sign on the village soviet; they should give us back our house now."

Putting down her spoon and wiping her tears with her apron, she burst forth in a long complaint heard for the hundredth time. Pyotr Filippovich and the children—a boy with his father's red hair, and a twelve-year-old daughter with a milky-white, moody face—continued to eat in silence. Finally Praskovya Savishna blurted out the piece of news that was giving her no rest:

"In Blagoveschenskoye village a convict—everybody says he is—was made burgomaster. They gave him a house with a first floor made of brick, and a horse. . . . And goodness knows, you've suffered enough to deserve something. . . ."

"And you're the world's biggest fool," was all that Pyotr Filippovich replied to this, but with such conviction that she immediately broke short and fell silent.

On the following day trucks arrived with Germans—this time in trench caps instead of helmets. The officers occupied the house that had belonged to Pyotr Filippovich's father, a good house with a tin roof; it stood diagonally across the street from the little house in which he now lived. The soldiers were

billeted in the various houses. Several days earlier almost all the young folk—teen-age boys and girls—had disappeared from the village: someone had lured them away. The Germans were very displeased about this. On the doors of the commandant's office and at the well they posted an announcement in two languages, on good paper: the rules of conduct for the Russians, with one penalty—death. Then a general search began. The frightened Praskovya Savishna related that they had a soldier who was an expert in finding hidden suckling pigs: he would quietly enter a farmyard and begin grunting—and you couldn't tell the difference from a real pig—grunting and listening. In several farmyards sucklings squealed in reply—and they had been so well hidden up in the attic. And how those women cried later on! . . .

The Germans took everything; they picked the houses clean. Praskovya Savishna was completely exhausted by her nightly occupation of dragging articles from the trunk to the cellar and from there to the ash heap, under the stove or some other place. Finally Pyotr Filippovich shouted at her and stamped his foot: "Either sit still or go away, lay down and die some place, or get out of here!" Their house was passed by, as though it were under a ban. Finally two soldiers armed with rifles appeared. Pyotr Filippovich pulled his father's caracul cap over his forehead and calmly walked off between the soldiers. On the porch of the commandant's office he stopped to watch a tall, respectable-looking German in eyeglasses pull a round-faced girl of about fourteen up to him and start pawing and squeezing her. She shielded herself with her elbows in fright and whispered, "Don't, please don't." He pressed her between his knees and squeezed her breasts with his large red hands. She started to cry. He hit her in the back of the head, and she stumbled and went off. He straightened his eyeglasses and looked at Pyotr Filippovich—not in the face or the eye, but higher.

"Is this Pyotr Gorshkov?" he asked, breathing hard.

Pyotr Filippovich followed the tall German into the house where he had been born and bred, had married, and had buried his father, mother and three of his children; this house had had a hold on him all his life, like a curse. The walls were freshly whitewashed and the floors washed; the smell of cigars hung in the room with the three windows; it was here that the Gorskov family had gathered around the table on big holidays in the old days. A second German carefully put down his pen, looking up at Pyotr Filippovich—in the same way, over his head—and said in Russian:

“Take off your hat and sit down in the chair near the door.”

This German was good-looking, with a dark moustache and a glistening part in his hair; on his black collar tabs there were silver streaks of lightning (in the ancient Runic alphabet they stand for the letters “s” and “s,” and are also the chief attributes of Thor, the Teutonic god of war).

“Your biography is known to us,” he began after a lengthy silence. “You were an enemy of Soviet power—which, I hope you continue to remain.” His hat on his knee Pyotr Filippovich was looking at the German officer with shining pin-points of eyes hidden behind wrinkled slits. “What do we want of you? We want: complete information about the population, and especially about contacts with the partisans; we want you to force the population to work; the Russians do not know how to work; we Germans do not like that—a man should work from morning to night all his life, otherwise death awaits him; where I was born, at my father’s place, there is a small mill worked by a dog—day and night she runs in a treadmill; the dog is an intelligent creature, she wants to live—I cannot say that much about the Russians. . . . And so, you will be appointed burgomaster of the village of Medvedovka. You will attend the execution of two partisans on Monday. Then you will enter upon your duties.”

Pyotr Filippovich returned home. His wife rushed up to him.

"Well, what did they tell you? Will they give us back the house?"

"Of course, of course," answered Pyotr Filippovich, wearily sitting down on a bench and unwinding his scarf.

"What else did they tell you?"

"They ordered you to heat the bathhouse for me."

Praskovya Savishna stopped short and stared at her husband, her lips pressed tight. But she was afraid to ask him again. "That's right—today is Saturday, and the Germans love order. . . ." She pulled on her boots and went out to heat the bathhouse on the bank of the brook.

Pyotr Filippovich steamed himself thoroughly, drank his fill of tea and lay down to sleep. Before daybreak he was already out of the house.

The partisans about whom the good-looking German with the streaks of lightning on his collar was so concerned had their headquarters not far from the village of Medvedovka, if you figure it as the crow flies, but it was very hard to get there: little lanes and barely noticeable paths led to a swamp through thick growths of fir, alder and other thickets; the headquarters was located on an island in the middle of the swamp; all the approaches to it were guarded by sentries; the Germans did not even dare to poke their noses into this forest. If a stranger entered it he would suddenly hear the hammering of a woodpecker somewhere close by, then a cuckoo calling in answer from afar, and then strange sounds all through the forest—knocks and whistles, the cawing of crows, the whining of dogs. . . . A stranger would have been terrified.

The day was windless and drizzly. No substantial operations were foreseen at partisan headquarters. Small groups of three or four went off as usual: some on reconnaissance, others to plant mines on the highway. Since dark a special group had been lying in wait for a troop train. German sentries walked

their two-kilometre beats along the sides of the embankment, which had been covered with lime to show up the footprints of partisans; the sentries cast gloomy, wary glances all around as they walked. Ten paces away from them, a girl observer camouflaged with broken branches lay in the sedge of a little marsh; she was armed with a carbine and two black grenades the size of goose eggs; farther off, behind a huge uprooted stump, sat a boy; this boy had seen soldiers in helmets and grey-green uniforms push his whole family—mother, grandmother and little sisters—into a barn with a hayloft and set a torch to it in the night, and among the cries he had heard the voice of his mother. The boy's face was sallow and prematurely wrinkled; he also did not take his eyes off the German marching along the embankment with helmet pulled down over his ears.

When one of the sentries had passed the spot designated by the partisans, a nimble lad in a tightly-belted quilted jacket crossed the roadbed in one bound, holding his tommy gun in front of him; instantly another lad dashed out of the bushes and with rapid movements began to place a complicated and deadly shell under the rail.

The entire train was visible as it roared around the bend; the white clouds of smoke hugged the earth, wandering among the tall stumps and the scattered slender birches. The huge, puffing engine approached, looming up over its drive wheels, and the sentries stepped off the roadbed in sign that the way was clear. A sharp explosion resounded in front of the locomotive, a column of sand rose skyward, and a piece of rail flew to the side, accompanied by whistling fragments; the locomotive cut into the ties with all its driving momentum; with a crash the coaches piled up, toppled over, and rolled heavily down the slope. Out of them scrambled screaming little grey-green figures. . . .

The partisans had a great deal of other work that morning besides this sort of thing. Chief of Staff Yevtyukhov was hav-

ing a quiet conversation with a guest—Ivan Sudarev, chief of the mounted scouts. Sitting in the drizzle on a felled pine near the camouflaged dugout, they were drinking from empty tin cans a French champagne whose praises had been sung by Pushkin. The old wounds of both ached in that dampness. Yevtyukhov was telling about the various difficulties and complications owing to lack of information about the enemy's plans and about what was going on in the German rear troops.

"We need an inside scout, but where to find him?! That's my worry."

"You have every right to worry," Ivan Sudarev said judiciously, and he threw out the remains of the weak beverage. "Without inside information you're like a brave man fighting blindfolded, and that's absurd."

In the midst of this conversation the rain-laden fir branches began to quiver and send down a shower of drops, and two girls in soaked tunics, short skirts and large boots appeared. Holding rifles with bayonets attached, they led Pyotr Filippovich. His eyes were bound with a cotton kerchief, and he walked with outstretched arms. Interrupting each other and justifying themselves, the girls related how they had captured this man three kilometres away; they couldn't understand how he had slipped past the sentries.

"He's a smart egg," Ivan Sudarev said to the Chief of Staff. "I once stayed overnight at his house in Medvedovka. He's clever and shrewd. Wonder what he's going to say."

Pyotr Filippovich's eyes were unbound, and the girls, shouldering their rifles, stepped aside reluctantly. Pyotr Filippovich raised his head, looking up at the fog-enveloped crowns of the trees, sighed, and said:

"This is just where I was headed for. I have some business with you."

"I'd like to know what kind of business you could have with me," replied the Chief of Staff, giving him a cold, piercing glance. "The Germans troubling you?"

"On the contrary, the Germans are not troubling me. You see, I served a ten-year sentence for sabotage."

"Do you know, Gorshkov, that you managed to reach this place, uninvited, but that getting back will be difficult?"

"Of course I know it. I counted on death."

The Chief of Staff exchanged glances with Ivan Sudarev and moved over on the log.

"Take a seat, Gorshkov, it'll be easier to talk. Now why did you choose such a complicated means of suicide?"

Pyotr Filippovich sat down and folded his hands on his stomach.

"Yes, I thought you might not believe me. But there was no way out. Yesterday they summoned me, you see, and offered me the position of burgomaster. The Germans go in for shared responsibility, and so they decided to involve me in their crimes: on Monday I'm to be present at the execution of two of your partisans...."

Yevtyukhov leapt up from the log.

"Ugh, the devil!"

His eyebrows twisted as he stood in front of Pyotr Filippovich and tried to pierce the impenetrable eye slits.

"Sit down, there's always time for *that*," Ivan Sudarev told him.

"Continue, Gorshkov, we're listening."

"First of all, this is what I want to tell you: I actually was a wrecker and was justly sentenced. I didn't belong to any organization—I was framed on that. But I was angry, that's all.... I didn't believe that my children would live well, in plenty, in happiness.... That when I grew old I would die with an easy heart, having forgiven people, the way it should be.... That I would be buried with honour on Russian soil.... There was no forgiveness in my heart.... Well, I got connect-

ed with a certain agronomist. He gave me some powders. . . . I thought and thought—the cows that fed us, and the horses—why were they to blame? I threw out those powders; that sin isn't against me. But the agronomist was caught, and during the questioning he mentioned me. . . . But I kept quiet out of anger: all right, exile me. . . .”

“A strange story,” said the Chief of Staff, who still had not calmed down.

“Why strange? A Russian isn't an ordinary person, a Russian is a cleverly contrived person. I worked in the camps ten years—didn't I think it over a bit? So, Pyotr Gorshkov, you're suffering. . . . Oh, excuse me, I'll only add about our house, my father's, with the tin roof—Praskovya Savishna worries about it, but not me; that died away long ago. . . . For what truth are you suffering? In the town of Pustozersk, not far from our camp, Archbishop Avvakum sat in a pit in the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. They had cut off his tongue because he wouldn't keep silent; with his tongue cut off, he sat in a pit and wrote appeals to the Russian people, begging them to live by the truth and to stand up for the truth, even unto death. . . . I read Avvakum's writings. Then there was one truth, and today it's another— but it's truth. . . . And this truth is the Russian soil.”

“He speaks convincingly,” Ivan Sudarev said to the Chief of Staff. “Continue, Gorshkov, and get down to business.”

“Let's not hurry—we'll get around to business too. Yesterday a German—an officer he was—was telling me that his dog was a clever and useful animal, which, he said, he could not say about the Russians. The Germans are making fun of us—eh?” Pyotr Filippovich suddenly relaxed his wrinkles and looked at his listeners with round, colourless, heavy eyes. “They're jeering at the Russian people: there it goes, unwashed and uncombed, a total fool—beat it to death! Yesterday another officer—right out on the street in front of everybody—began to paw little Anyutka Kiseleva, a sweet little girl, and he lift-

ed up her dress and got all out of breath. What's it all about? Is it the coming of the antichrist? Is it the end of the Russian land? The Soviet power has armed the people and led it into battle to stop the damned Germans from insulting us. You're doing important work, comrades, I thank you. The Soviet rule springs from our own people, from us Russians, peasants. I wrote off and forgot my personal score long ago."

Pyotr Filippovich leaned his elbows on his knees and covered his forehead under the peak of his catacul cap with his palm.

"Now—decide. Lead me into the forest and shoot me. I'm ready—only, by God, it'll hurt. . . . Or else trust me. Here's what I propose: to give you all the information about them; I'll know everything, I'll get into their army headquarters—I've plenty of cunning. I'll work boldly. I'm not afraid of death, tortures don't frighten me either."

Ivan Sudarev and Chief of Staff Yevtyukhov went into the dugout, where they had a little argument. On the one hand, it was difficult to trust such a person; on the other, it would be foolish not to take advantage of his proposal. They climbed out of the dugout, and Yevtyukhov said sternly to Pyotr Filippovich, who continued to sit on the log:

"We've decided to trust you. If you deceive us—we'll find you even in hell!"

Pyotr Filippovich's face brightened. He rose, took off his hat, and bowed.

"I am happy," he said. "Very happy. I'll supply the information wherever you say, through my little girl. My son is weak—takes after his mother; but the daughter, Anna, is like me—she's a sullen, secretive child."

Pyotr Filippovich was blindfolded, and the same girls led him away.

Early in the morning on Monday, the same sort of wet and dismal day, German soldiers began to drive the inhabitants

out into the street, shouting strange words at them and pointing in the direction of the village soviet. On a small square where until recently there had been a little garden with a statue of Lenin, torn down and smashed by the Germans, gallows were now created.

Everybody already knew that they were going to hang Alexei Sviridov, a Young Communist League member whom the Germans had wounded in a hazel grove not far from the village, and Klavdia Ushakova, a schoolteacher from Medvedovka who was captured while trying to carry Alexei Sviridov off to safety.

Pointing with their chins and shouting like they would have at cattle, the soldiers drove the people up closer to the gallows. The rain streamed down their steel helmets, down the wrinkled faces of women, down the cheeks of children. The mud gurgled underfoot. Nothing was heard but the faint outcries of villagers pricked by bayonets.

A truck drove up. The schoolteacher, bareheaded and as white as a corpse, her black coat unbuttoned and her hands tied behind her back, was standing on it. The half-dead Sviridov sat at her feet. He was a fiery, lovable fellow, well liked in the village. There was hardly anything left of him after the tortures: he slumped like a sack of flour. Two officers followed the truck: the tall German in glasses, carrying a camera, and the good-looking one. They were both smiling smugly as they looked about at the Russians.

The truck turned around and backed up under the gallows. Two soldiers jumped onto the truck. Then Klavdia Ushakova, opening her eyes wide as though with incomprehending astonishment, shouted in a low-pitched voice:

"Comrades, I'm dying, wipe out the Germans, swear you will"

A soldier swung his palm over her mouth and at once began hastily and clumsily pulling the noose over her thin childish neck.

Still seated, Alexei Sviridov gave a hoarse, heart-rending shout:

"Comrades, kill the Germans! . . ."

The other soldier struck him over the head and also began to pull the noose over his head.

The people in the crowd were weeping louder and louder. The truck jerked forward sharply. Klavdia Ushakova's legs dragged forward, her body pitched back as though she were falling, and then she swung free. She was the first to hang on the thin rope, her bare head bent toward her shoulder, her eyes closed. . . .

Pyotr Filippovich, the burgomaster, stood on the spot where the truck had been. The crowd watched with horror as he removed his hat and crossed himself.

At dusk several days after the execution the Chief of Staff stood in the designated place, in a thicket of scrub oak in a gully, waiting for the Gorshkov girl but Gorshkov himself came. He squatted on his haunches and in a quiet voice began to give a detailed account of the execution.

"The people realized that great martyrs, saints, had departed from this world. Their last challenging words are still ringing in everybody's ears. As for information, here it is. . . ."

He then began to report more important information than the Chief of Staff had ever dreamed of. For a long time he gazed wide-eyed at Gorshkov.

"Well, if you're lying. . . ."

In reply Pyotr Filippovich only spread out his palms and grinned; out of his hat he took a map on which the German petrol and munitions stores were marked with crosses.

"Don't you draw any more maps," Yevtyukhov told him, pocketing the sheet of paper. "I forbid it most firmly. Keep everything in your memory--and no papers! And don't come here any more yourself. Send the girl."

Gorshkov's information proved accurate. German dumps were blown skyward one after the other. The pale, taciturn

Anna stole up to the gully almost every evening with information both important and unimportant. One day she said in her usual grumbling indifferent tone:

"Papa told me to tell you they've received new tommy guns and that he's got the key to the warehouse now. You'll be the first ones to get them. Come tomorrow night, but he said you shouldn't fire at the sentries but only use knives."

Pyotr Filippovich operated boldly. He seemed to be mocking the Germans, to be demonstrating to them that the Russian is truly a cleverly contrived person, and that it was not for a shallow, limited German mind to 'grapple with the sober, inspired, sharp Russian mind which often displays almost unlimited potentialities.

Both officers were confident that they had found a quick-witted person as loyal to them as a dog to its master. They lived in constant terror: under their very noses army stores burned down and trains were wrecked—and just those trains which were carrying troops or especially important freight; it never would have occurred to them, for instance, that a good half of the rifles, tommy guns and revolvers received in crates from Warsaw were already gone, and that carefully sealed crates loaded with sand had been shipped from Medvedovka to the front. The officer with Thor's streaks of lightning on his collar never dreamed that the object of the attack on his house one murky night had been to steal for several hours his dispatch case, containing a map with extremely important notations. He himself escaped with nothing more serious than a scare when in the middle of the night the windowpane crashed and something landed on the floor with such a blast that if he had not been lying on a low cot at the time the irreparable would have occurred. He sprang out into the street in his drawers. Pandemonium spread through the village. Soldiers ran out of the huts shouting "*Partisanen!*" and firing into the darkness. Two sentries with slashed throats

lay near the officer's porch. It was morning before he realized that his dispatch case was missing. Later on Pyotr Filippovich brought it together with a little suitcase and a muddled uniform—he had found these articles in a vegetable patch nearby; the partisans had evidently dropped them as they fled.

Pyotr Filippovich's burgomastership cost the Germans dearly. But finally he was caught—because of a petty thing, or rather, because of his overbearing wrath against the Germans. He stole a rubber stamp and a letterhead, took a German typewriter from the warehouse, and drove over to the village of Staraya Buda, where the partisan detachment of Vasily Vasilyevich Kozubsky operated. The director of the school wrote him out a pass in German to enter the town and army headquarters. Although Vasily Vasilyevich knew German well, he made a mistake in a case ending. This was Gorshkov's undoing. He was detained and sent back to Medvedovka together with the forged pass. Neither the tall officer nor the good-looking one could grasp such unfathomable Russian insidiousness, but later they became enraged: now everything was clear. . . .

This happened at a time when the Red Army had broken through one of the sectors of the German front and was driving the Germans out of villages and hamlets. The partisans were the first to enter and occupy Medvedovka. On the street Yevtyukhov was accosted by Anna; the girl's hair was matted with earth and twisted as though by plice; her face was drawn, dusty, aged; her dress was torn at the knees.

"Are you looking for my papa?"

"Yes, yes, what's the matter with him?"

"The Germans burned down our hut and killed mama and brother. They tortured my papa four days; he's still hanging alive. come on."

Walking as though in a trance, Anna led Yevtyukhov to

the former Gorshkov house with the tin roof. She turned and with difficulty parted her lips to say:

"Don't you think anything—my papa didn't tell them a word."

Gorshkov, clad only in his underpants, hung from a cross beam in the cowshed; his feet were blue and slack; his sagging body was covered with welts; his arms had been twisted behind his back, and his ribs protruded—a hook had been fixed into his right chest, and he hung from the cross beam on a rib....

When Yevtyukhov called some men and tried to lift him to lighten his sufferings, Pyotr Filippovich, evidently delirious, muttered:

"*Nichevo*. We're Russians."





MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

THEY picked her up on the road. At first they thought she was dead and Grisha wheeled sharply to avoid running over her little bare legs. But she raised her head and her hair ruffled by the wind looked like faded grass. Grisha jammed on the brakes and Yuri, who was sitting beside him, jumped down and bent over the little girl.

"Climb in," he said briefly.

She stirred and tried to rise on all fours but rolled over on her side in the dust. Her pinched little face with the half-closed eyelids told a story of disease and starvation; she reminded one of a puppy who sits beside a fence with a bit of rope around its neck, staring up in mute misery at the passers-by. Yuri scanned the steppe with the low spring clouds scudding over it but could see no sign of habitation anywhere.

"Hm! I understand!" he said grimly, although he understood nothing. He picked up the child. Her head fell back onto his shoulder but at once she drew away in fear. So frail and light was she that her very bones seemed empty.

Yuri placed her on a pile of tarpaulin in the truck between the shell cases, and jumped into the cab, slamming the door with the stained, bullet-pitted glass.

"Come on, step on the gas. We're late."

"Probably lives somewhere around here," Grisha said with his hands on the steering wheel, "and we're taking her the lord knows where."

Yuri did not reply until about five kilometres later.

"I can't understand how that thinking apparatus of yours works," he said in the slow squeaky drawl he had affected since the war began.

They turned off the road onto a boundless expanse of last year's stubble; the wheels sank into the soft black soil and the radiator was steaming before they finally reached the edge of a ravine and, with a loud screeching of brakes, drove down the steep slope and came to a halt not far from the battery which was covered with camouflage nets.

"I bet there's not much left of her by now," said Grisha, wiping his perspiring forehead with his sleeve. But the little girl was still alive. They carried her into the cab. "Now sit still and don't touch anything," Grisha admonished sternly.

But the warning was unnecessary for the flame of life barely flickered beneath the shabby little calico dress.

Yuri gazed unemotionally at her pinched face with the two adult lines at the corners of her half-opened mouth. When the artillerymen had finished unloading the ammunition he went over to the dugout.

On a shell case at the entrance to the dugout sat the battery commander, a captain whose broad clean-shaven, copper-hued face looked as if it had been scalded. He was smoking a short pipe inhaling the smoke with evident pleasure.

"Nice and quiet here, eh?" he said to Yuri. "You can even hear the skylarks sing. Just flew in this morning, damn them."

"How're things here?" Yuri asked.

"Well, last night we had the Jerries on the jump. Like to take a look? Five tanks and two psychological attacks. You can get a fine view of the results from the top of the knoll...."

After having listened politely to the captain who was still reliving the excitement of the night's fighting, Yuri said in a firm voice:

"Got any candy around here by any chance? Some chocolate perhaps?"

The captain gaped. "Chocolate?" he said taking the pipe out of his mouth. "First time I've heard a senior lieutenant asking for chocolate in the middle of the steppes."

"There's a little girl over there in the truck."

"Why didn't you say so right away. Have to ask the scouts. They pick up chocolate now and again."

In his hoarse drawl Yuri explained that the captain hadn't quite caught his meaning. They walked over to the truck and when he saw the tormented little creature there the captain's coppery face expressed pity.

"What's your name? Eh? Where are you from?" he asked thickly.

But the little girl drew her head into her shoulders again and did not reply.

"They've beaten her, the swine," said the captain, "that's obvious." And he sighed as he thought of his own family which had suffered similarly at the hands of the Germans. "She must be from Vladimirskeye village over on the other side. . . . What are you going to do with her?" (Yuri shrugged his shoulders.) "It'll be a bit noisy for her here at the battery. . . . Come on, let's look for some chocolate."

"Don't, don't," the little girl pleaded in a barely audible whisper when the captain, Yuri and Grisha tried to thrust a piece of chocolate into her mouth. The fingers of all three of them were thick and coarse and the little girl's mouth so small that they were afraid to hurt her. They coaxed and pleaded until finally she tasted the sweetness on her chocolate-smeared lips and opened her mouth. With a delighted wheeze the captain pushed half the bar in between her teeth.

On the way back she stayed beside Grisha in the cab, while Yuri sat on the top to keep an eye on the sky. They rolled from side to side, trailing a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Presently Grisha became aware that the child was looking at him. The chocolate had evidently instilled a little life into her. He gave her the other half of the bar.

"Won't you talk to me?" he asked: "You're quite a big girl, you know."

"No," she answered in a subdued tone.

"Why not? We won't do you any harm. Tell us your name. Where's your folks? You have a mother and a father somewhere, haven't you?"

The little girl turned away and did not look at him any more. The chocolate lay untouched in her lap. When they reached the dugout in a wooded ravine, not far from the ammunition dump, which Yuri and Grisha shared with another five Red Army men, they made her a little bed of grass and covered her with an army overcoat. They washed her head in the brook and gave her a piece of soap and told her to bathe, turning their backs discreetly so as not to embarrass her (for she must have been about ten years old). Yuri washed her little dress and darned the holes. They were careful about feeding her at first, giving her a little at a time at frequent intervals, but since all seven of them tried to make her eat she continued to protest feebly when they endeavoured to thrust food into her mouth. She lay for days in the dugout with her face to the wall, dozing, evidently. When the men tried to joke with her she turned away. One evening Yuri took it into his head to recite a popular children's verse to her—as much as he remembered of it—but the little girl looked at him with such a bitter reproach in her eyes that he halted abruptly in the middle and went outside to smoke.

"There's something seriously wrong with that kid," Grisha told him. "she's not all there. Why don't you try taking her to town and putting her in hospital."

The advice was sound. But since the idea was Grisha's and not his, Yuri snorted:

"She's quite all right, there's nothing the matter with her.... It's the easiest thing in the world to get rid of a person. Hospital! It isn't iodoform she needs. It's an adult's grief that's gnawing at her.... That's what's wrong with her...."

At twilight and dawn German planes roared and spluttered among the stars. Over by the station the ack-ack guns boomed and the heavy thuds of explosions reverberated. The men had to sleep in snatches, with one eye open, as it were.

One morning when Yuri and Grisha returned to the dugout so exhausted that they took off their boots and threw themselves on their bunks without eating, Vanya, the machine gunner, came in and sat on the edge of Yuri's bunk. Vanya was lucky, living in the dugout in the ravine, for the Germans never came over his way.

"You know what," he said, "she cried all night long, cried bitterly like a grownup. Didn't let me sleep."

Yuri glanced dully at his chubby face thinking: "It'd take more than that to keep you awake...." It turned out that all that day the little girl had followed Vanya around like a shadow, tagging after him wherever he went. Even when he went over to the machine-gun nest he turned round to find her standing among the bushes. And when he told her crossly to take cover quickly she had crawled over and sat at his feet (he had been fixing the lock) calling his name in a low, piteous wail. "What's the trouble?" he had demanded, "Hungry?" But all she would say was "Vanya" and in such a tone that it made his flesh creep, the machine gunner averred.

Overhearing the story from his bunk Grisha, who was already half asleep, muttered: "Good, that means she's coming around. Did she tell you her name?"

"Didn't say anything except Vanya, Vanya all day long. Kept after me all the time. And then cried all night."

That the ice in the little girl's heart was melting seemed obvious to all of them—even Yuri. Vanya was such a simple fellow, so good-natured and easygoing and there was such an air of optimistic assurance about him that it was perhaps natural that the little girl had taken to him.

That night Yuri woke up. Switching on his flashlight he saw the child lying with her knees hunched up and her arms clutching her grass pillow; she was weeping bitterly and calling in a low hoarse voice: "Mummy, mummy, where are you?" Yuri did not wake her. Let her find her mamma in her dreams at least, he thought. "Why are you hiding from me, Mummy," she said. When, after a brief silence, she emitted a faint but joyous cry, Yuri concluded that she had found her mother.

Yuri lit a cigarette and turned over on his back. He lay there musing. He thought of the question Ivan Karamasov had asked his brother Alyosha as they sat together in the tavern in the dim, remote past: if it were necessary for the sake of human happiness to sacrifice, to torment a single child would you be willing to do it, for the sake of human happiness? When he asked this question Ivan Karamazov believed that he had posed an insoluble riddle to Alyosha. And indeed Alyosha had not been able to find an answer.... To torture a child! What could be more terrible? Even to ensure the greatest happiness for all mankind.... Surely such happiness would be accursed.... But actually, Yuri thought, there was a simple solution to the Karamazov riddle; he and others like him had found it: yes, yes, I would do it, but on condition that that child is myself. And in any case, Yuri reflected, the riddle was a foolish one, artificial and theoretical. Life itself had offered another one: for the sake of saving a single child—this little girl for instance—from suffering, is everyone who calls himself a human being ready to

sacrifice all his life if need be? A straight question and a clear answer. All of them—Grisha, and Ivan, the machine gunner, and the other four who were now snoring mightily in the dugout, and he, Yuri, himself, would reply: aye, ready.

Yuri filled his pipe again. His throat was tight with wrath. Well, so much for philosophy. Now let us examine the question practically, in figures—three million Germans for this little girl, three million long-legged blond beasts, with their bovine eyes and vile minds. . . .

Vanya, the machine gunner, crawled through the shrubs with his messtin down to the creek at the bottom of the gully. There was a stagnant pool there where he fished for crayfish whenever he had a few minutes to spare.

Vanya pulled off his tunic and shirt, lay down on his stomach at the edge of the pool and began fishing about with his hands in the slime, sometimes reaching down so far that his face was immersed. Each time he caught a crayfish in his grasp he would say: "Aha, Hans-Spans, you popeyed bastard, I got you! You don't like it. Come on, get into the tin." Once he dived into the icy water up to his waist sending up a fountain of bubbles, and as he emerged holding a huge green crayfish by the tail, he heard a delicate ripple of laughter behind his back. Wiping his streaming hair and face he turned round to see the little girl with a broad smile on her face. . . .

"Oh it's you, is it? Shame on you, laughing at a poor soldier."

The little girl opened her eyes wide, puckered her forehead and seemed just about to burst into tears. . . .

"Now, Masha, don't cry. I was only kidding you."

"I'm not Masha, I'm Valya," said the little girl.

"Good girl! Now we know what to call you!" Vanya said, his teeth chattering as he slipped on his shirt and tunic. Then

he sat down next to Valya, threw his arm over her shoulders and drew her close to him.

"Like crayfish?" he said.

"Mhm," she replied.

"Good. I'll have a smoke first and then we'll have a feast, all right?"

"All right."

Vanya tore a strip off a piece of newspaper, folded it between his fingers, shook a little makhorka onto it from his tobacco tin, rolled it and passed his tongue over the fold.

"Don't be sore at me, Valya. Lieutenant Yura has ordered me to get your story. He's a good sort but he's strict and, of course, if I don't carry out his orders, I'm in for it..."

Vanya pulled a lighter out of his pocket, struck the flint three times with a piece of iron until the wick caught alight, and lit his cigarette.

"Now, out with it, like a good little girl..."

Picced together from Valya's disjointed recital which lasted with intervals for several days, her story was as follows: She had lived with her mother, Matryona Khrabrova, in the village of Vladimirskoye. Valya's elder brother, Andrei, served in the Red Army, the younger boy, Misha, had been missing since the autumn before when the village was taken by the Germans.

Matryona Khrabrova, her mother, had lived in mortal fear of one of the villagers and whenever she saw him through the window she would say in a voice shaken with hatred: "There's that antichrist, snooping around again, the devil take him..." And when Valya would ask: "Mamma, why do you call Mikhei Ivanych that?" the mother replied: "When you grow up you'll know... But now you'd best learn to hold your tongue.

Valya. . . . Don't dare repeat outside anything you hear me saying at home, you hear?"

Valya and her mother lived very poorly. They had three hens, two white ones and one yellow and a respectable rooster who always gave all the tasty morsels he picked up to the hens. Matryona had them all hidden from the Germans in different places. "When spring comes our hens will lay three eggs a day and then, little daughter, you'll get some colour in your cheeks."

One early morning about three weeks before, Matryona roused Valya from bed. "Daughter," she said, "put on my boots and shawl and run outside and see what the rooster is making all that noise about. Maybe a fox has got into the shed. . . ."

Valya climbed into her mother's high boots, threw the shawl over her head and ran outside. She found the door of the shed wide open, the gate ajar and the hens gone. Only the rooster was running about the yard clucking angrily. Valya looked out onto the road and gasped. A German soldier was walking away from their yard, carrying the hens by the legs, their feathers drooping. . . . Valya cried out and ran after the soldier. But he climbed into a covered truck greeted by a chorus of raucous voices, and the truck drove off. Valya ran after it shouting: "Mister, mister, those are our hens. . . ."

On the other side of the street opposite Matryona's cottage stood the new brick school building. Some time before a car had pulled up outside the building and several men in black overcoats and black caps had alighted. They had thrown the books and school desks out into the yard, chalked over the windows and put a barbed wire fence around the grounds and the school became a Gestapo headquarters. The Vladimirskoye folk went out of their way to avoid passing the building and whenever Matryona had to leave her cottage she would climb over the backfence into the lane on the other side.

Valya, still standing in the street, saw Mikhei Ivanych coming out of the Gestapo. She heard his heels clicking on the gravel path as he slinked past the sentry and saw him stagger forward as if drunk. His face looked blue, and all puckered up as if the light of day hurt his eyes. When he came up to where Valya stood he halted and stared down at her with his flat expressionless eyes. "What're you gaping at, you little brat," he said and struck Valya a blow on the head, kicking savagely at her but missing his aim each time. At that point Matryona came running out of the gate shouting wildly. She came at Mikhei like a wild creature and sunk her nails into his puffy round face. "What do you mean by hitting my daughter!" she screamed, throwing him down and raining blows on his face. "You cursed anti-christ!" He was either drunk or too scared to do anything but waved his arms and legs helplessly and Matryona beat him until someone came out onto the steps of the Gestapo, slammed the door and barked a sharp command.

Mikhei never forgave Valya's mother for that encounter. That night two black-garbed soldiers came into their hut carrying pocket flashlights and stood at the entrance. Presently an officer with a long neck and a small chinless face entered, followed by Mikhei Ivanovich.

Matryona trembled and leaned against the stove for support. "I'm done for, daughter mine," she whispered.

Mikhei tore Valya away from her mother and thrust her behind the partition where the bed stood. "Shall we begin the search, *Herr Oberleutnant*?"

The officer sat down at the table and replied slowly in Russian: "Proceed."

Through a crack in the door Valya saw Mikhei jump onto the bench and stick his hand into the corner behind the icon.

"I thought so, *Herr Oberleutnant*, a letter from her son Mishka."

Valya heard her mother say in a quiet clear voice: "He's just put it there himself.... Believe me, mister.... My son Mikhail has been missing since last year, the whole village knows it.... How can I have a letter from him...."

The officer took out a white cigarette case and opened it; a cigarette popped out and lit up automatically....

Mikhei snickered: "Now, isn't that cunning...."

The officer puffed at his cigarette—his upper lip was longer than the lower—placed his elbows on the table and began to read the letter.

Mikhei leaned over to whisper: "It's his letter, he is a partisan scout and maintains contact with his mother.... Her other son, Andrei, pilots planes across the front line to those partisans...."

"Believe me, mister," Matryona spoke up again, "he couldn't write me a letter, I can't read."

"We'll soon find out whether you can or not." The veins suddenly stood out all over the officer's long neck. "I don't intend to waste any time with you. I advise you to tell the truth now, because the pain will be terrible. Prepare the rope, bench and brazier," he flung over his shoulder to the black-coated soldiers. And from under the shadow of his large cap, thrust low over his eyes, he fixed his gaze on Matryona's blue hands folded over her stomach....

Valya could not bring herself to tell even Vanya, the machine gunner, what happened after that. Her teeth were clenched tight, her little throat swelled and instead of words there came a thin pitiful squeak. Yet Vanya gathered that Valya had sat for several hours behind the door listening to the Germans torturing her mother, heard the groans, gasps, screams and mutters followed by a scuffle and a shriek of pain in a voice she could not recognize as her mother's....

The next morning a neighbour had crept into Matryona's hut and found the floor covered with blood, tufts of hair and rags. Valya lay unconscious behind the partition on a disor-

dered bed among pillows bitten to shreds. The neighbour carried her into her own house, locked up Matryona's house and closed the shutters.

The days were hot and sultry. Clouds of dust raised by endless streams of trucks and cars hung steadily over the roads. A coppery-hued sun burned through the dusty haze. Yuri, thin, black and irritable, came rarely to the dugout and when he did his hoarse mutter got on everyone's nerves. It was obvious that a storm was brewing, that the Germans were getting ready to strike a blow and that it was going to be a fierce one. . . .

The battery commander drove over one day on his old rattletrap. His broad face looked broader than ever and he was covered with dust from his whiskers to his boots. He sat down on the bench beside the one-legged table under the small oak tree and, removing his cap with evident relief, asked for a drink of spring water.

"Thought I'd drop in here on my way from the station," he said to Yuri. "Damn fine crayfish you've got in the creek here, I could do with a few dozen." He called Valya over and approvingly pinched her rounded cheeks. "Why, you're looking fine, bright-eyes. . . . Remember how you turned up your nose at that chocolate?" he laughed so heartily that Valya backed away from him. "Now you eat everything, I suppose? Good girl. . . . Now run along and fetch me some nice fat crayfish. . . ."

The captain downed one and a half messtins of icy water, then lit a cigarette and began to talk of this and that as men at the front are wont to in moments of leisure: he talked about home, about his loved ones there, and about the past; about the fact that there were more ducks and grouse than mosquitoes that year ("I'm going to take a furlough this autumn and pay a visit to my mother in the Urals and do a bit of shooting. . . ."). He said he envied Yuri having a job that

enabled him to get around so much "while I have to stick at the battery like a badger wondering where the dickens I can lay my hands on a copy of Alexander Dumas' works. . . . Read him? I haven't, and they say he's a fascinating writer. . . ."

"What do you hear about the Germans?" Yuri inquired hoarsely. "How long is this business expected to last?"

"Another five days or so, we believe. . . . The Germans are getting pretty nervous. They've concentrated an artillery regiment on my section, shifted from somewhere else. They had 'total' blighters in the forward positions before, now they've replaced them with picked units, nearly all of them with decorations of some kind. It's not so easy to capture prisoners nowadays. Tanks and aircraft galore. . . . And we have to sit tight and wait. The waiting part is lousy, I agree."

"They're not going to have it easy, though," Yuri said, sticking out his sharp nose.

"You bet they aren't. This isn't 1901 any more. . . . We'll give it to them hot. . . ."

The captain was only too glad to change the subject when Valya appeared bringing a wattle basket with green crayfish crawling angrily at the bottom. The captain put on his cap, rose and stretched himself.

"I'm not inviting you to come and visit us at the battery. . . . The devil knows, they may start their offensive tonight for all we know. My scouts intercepted one of their orders giving them three days to surround the Red Army and four days to wipe it out. We had a good laugh over that. . . . Well, so long. . . . It may be some time before we meet again. . . ."

Now the dust clouds were raised by more than wheels—the whole horizon in the west thundered behind a thick black curtain of smoke. Untold numbers of aircraft rent the sky with their deafening roar, which went on incessantly day and night for a week and more. Two hydra-headed giants

had come to grips at last. Like some huge anthill the rear stirred—companies, regiments and divisions marched or rode forward, trucks loaded high with shells tore over the roads; it was as though the Volga, the Urals and Siberia were hurling great streams of red-hot coals at this seething, boiling strip of earth where the German armies in deadly fury were straining to break through the Russian armies and, failing to break through, perished in the attempt, and more field-grey companies, battalions, regiments and divisions leapt out of railway cars and trucks, tore forward in tanks and behind tanks to be blown skyhigh, burned, charred, torn to pieces by Russian artillery shells, aircraft bombs, tanks and katyushas.

At this period Valya was forgotten. One day Yuri dropped in for some cigarettes. His sunken cheeks were covered with stubble and his eyes had lost their lustre. Entering the dugout where no one had been for a whole week he was surprised to find everything spick and span; the floor was swept, the cots were tidy and a tiny posy of yellow flowers stood on top of the rusty iron stove. Valya was sitting quietly sewing a doll's dress out of a piece of faded rag; beside her lay the doll—a tiny bundle of cotton waste, the face made of paper with eyes drawn on it in pencil.

"Hallo, Valya, how's the girl? Not scared to be all by yourself, eh?"

"No, I'm not scared, Uncle Yuri."

"How are you managing without hot food?"

"The matches are all gone. Leave me a few, please Uncle Yuri.... I can cook quite nicely...."

"Good girl. Well, Valya, keep it up. Things aren't going so badly ... So long."

The village of Vladimirskeye was taken so suddenly that not a single German had time to get away. Even the Gestapo—a huge truckload of black-coats and their commander was

intercepted on the highway and burned with all it contained. The front continued to move west. Yuri moved along with it to a copse not far from Vladimirskoye village.

One evening after supper Grisha, the chauffeur, relating the various bits of front-line gossip which chauffeurs for some reason always learn before other folks, said in passing:

"That Valya of ours is a stubborn little thing. Yesterday she ran over to the village and asked about that Mikhei Ivanyeh whatsisname—Nepei. Came back looking glum. Seems Nepei has disappeared. Folks say he was worse than the plague, they'd bury him alive if they could lay their hands on him. And he knew it. So he skidooed."

No sooner had Grisha mentioned Mikhei than Valya appeared. Her puckered little face with the lips compressed into a hard line was the face of an adult. She sat down on the edge of a log next to Yuri. When they had talked their fill and Vanya, the machine gunner, had pulled out a German mouth organ he was learning to play. Valya said, her head drooping:

"Uncle Yuri, find that man who tortured my mother."

They all turned to look at the little girl. Yuri, his nostrils quivering, replied: "We'll try, Valya. Comrades, we shall have to find out more about that fellow."

Grisha, the chauffeur, undertook to do the scouting. A few days later when they met again at about the same time he was able to report what he had gleaned.

Mikhei Ivanyeh had come to the village some eight years before from another province and had married a widow, a collective farmer, and had soon driven her to the grave. Of himself he said that he came from a long line of miners but it was more likely that his father and he, too, before the revolution, had been contractors at the mines. By nature he was mean and cunning. You could always get some *samogon** in his place

* Home-distilled vodka.

provided you brought something to eat with you or some money. At one time the veterinary doctor had taken to drinking with him quite frequently and the two of them had done something the villagers did not find out until later under the Germans when Mikhei openly boasted of his cleverness. Early in the morning on the eve of Pokrov Day when the milkmaid came to the barn to milk the cows she found "Chairlady," a handsome Siementhal and the pride of the farm, lying dead on her straw with her teeth bared in a death grimace. There was a great commotion in the farm. The veterinary, who had spent the previous night at Mikhei's place, came over with the farmers and examined the animal. "Better not come too close," he said weightily, "it may be anthrax." The cow was hauled beyond the village limits with every precaution and buried along with the hide and the cowbarn thoroughly disinfected. Fortunately, there hadn't been any other cases. But Mikhei and the veterinary ate salted beef all winter. What they had actually done, Mikhei boasted later, was quite simple. He had taken a large potato and, opening the barn door with a skeleton key, had thrust his hand down the animal's throat up to the elbow and stuck the potato right in the windpipe. The following night he and the veterinary had dug up the cow and freshened the meat.

When the war with the Germans broke out, Mikhei was so delighted that he could not hide his malicious joy. He went about on that first day of war with his eyes sparkling and to everyone he met he said: "Now the blood will flow. . . . Ah yes, the blood will flow. . . ." When our troops passed through the village during the retreat, tottering with fatigue, hungry and dejected, and when some Red Armymen knocked at Mikhei's door to ask for a drink of milk he opened the window a crack and whined: "I haven't got any, the Soviets cleaned me out. . . ." But when the Germans entered in the wake of their tanks Mikhei, his hair combed and shining with grease, wearing a clean shirt and his best jacket, stood at the gates holding a

loaf of bread and a silver saltcellar on an embroidered towel. He kept bowing to the Germans until one of the officers took the bread from him in passing, handed it to a soldier and said: "Very commendable behaviour. . . ."

Soon Mikhci began going the rounds of the houses engaging the peasants in conversation. He would seat himself on the doorstep, tapping his stick on the ground and look up with a cunning expression on his face at the gloomy peasant and his bewildered wife.

"I don't know," he would say, "I can't for the life of me see what we, collective farmers, are going to do under the new power. I admit I offered them bread and salt when they came. But I didn't realize what I was doing and now I've begun to wish I hadn't. . . . After all, the Soviet power did give us something. Of course, under the Germans you have order, private trade and all that, but they're a tough lot. . . . So you get to thinking one way and another. That's why I go around visiting folks." He scratched behind his ear with a small stick. "Habit, I suppose . . . the collective spirit. . . . Notice how many folks are going off to join the partisans, that means there's something doing somewhere. . . . And then who can tell how long the Germans are here for. What do you think, Stepan Petrovich?"

In the first week or two the soldiers of the German garrison appeared to take no notice of the population. They took life easy, held their exercises, played football, blew on their trumpets, walked about the village in shorts shocking the villagers. But when the black-coats came and a notice was hung outside the school building on a bulletin board threatening the villagers with execution for every offence, the Germans showed their fangs. They plundered the village in organized fashion, stripped it clean and what the black-coats were unable to carry away in trucks was picked up by the garrison soldiers.

The Gestapo began to take an interest in every family. And it was then that the Vladimirskoye peasants understood why

Mikhei had come to them with his ambiguous talk. In the course of those conversations the scoundrel had cleverly contrived to find out which family had a son or son-in-law in the Red Army, which of them was associated with the local Communists, and who had been friendly with Veryovkin, the schoolteacher. Just before the Germans had entered the village, the teacher had left together with a few young lads and was now said to be blowing up bridges and munitions dumps in the district; he had wrecked a train carrying an SS armour battalion and had set fire to a good number of trucks on the roads.

After this terrible train disaster (the train had been traveling at full speed and the cars had piled one atop the other, and crashed over the side of a steep embankment), the black-coats began picking up people—old folks and youngsters—and taking them to the school building. Most of the arrests were made in houses Mikhei had visited. In the night harrowing screams issued from the cellar of the school. They could be heard all over the village and the peasants, unable to sleep, sat up all night shaking their heads and the old folks whispered prayers. . . .

It was rumoured that Mikhei was present during the torture of the victims, that is how the villagers explained the appearance of two cows and a bullock in his stable. He went about now in a field-grey coat, kept his hair and beard neatly trimmed and once someone actually saw him smoking a cigar. The peasants took to hiding their food and what was left of their clothing and sent the children off out of hearing whenever they saw him coming. They would have preferred not to let him in, but were afraid. Now he always had a bottle of schnapps in his pocket when he came visiting.

"My countrymen haven't much use for me," he would say sitting down at the table, "I know it, I see everything. . . . They don't trust me. . . . And they spin all sorts of wild yarns about me." (From another pocket he would produce some bacon and cut it into small squares.) "But why am I different from anyone

else? Am I a beast or a devil? If you knew, my friends, how sick and tired I am of these Germans. They thought they found someone they could trust and, you know what the Germans are, once they've made up their minds about something, you can't shake them. Organization, that's their trump card. They haven't time to think about other things, they don't think much in general...." Mikhei would pour out a glass of schnapps and push it along with a piece of bacon toward his hungry host. "It's them that've been spreading the filthy lies about my working in the Gestapo. They do that to pull me in so as to make sure that if the Soviet power returns Mikhei should have no place to go.... Come on, let's have a drink and forget it. If in a moment of weakness I did wrong or said something I shouldn't have, forgive me for Christ's sake.... I got this bottle from them, but how? Threw it in my face, they did, as if I was a dog, or something. And those cows of mine, too.... I had the money tucked away long ago.... I have a weakness for milk, and even more for salt beef." Pouring out more drinks he would continue with a sly wink and a leer. "Wish to hell I hadn't bought those damn cows with all the rotten gossip about me.... I think I'll drop everything and get out of here.... I'll get across the front somehow and they can do what they want with me over there.... Or else I'll go to Veryovkin and beg him on my bended knees to take me and give me a chance to wash out all my sins with my blood...."

The more sensible peasants would listen to him in silence, but the simple-minded ones would begin to trust him and let their tongues wag. And a few days later the black-coats would come for them.

Yuri went with Valya to the major in charge of the intelligence division and told him about Mikhei. Looking anxiously from Yuri to the major Valya listened so tensely that it seemed her entire little being was possessed by a single hope—to

find this man, and that if he was not found the flame of hope that kept her alive would be extinguished. The major made a note of all the facts about Mikhei. "We'll look for the scoundrel," he said briefly. And Valya smiled, looked searchingly at him and again her little face quivered.

They walked back to the camp in the woods, Valya trotting along in an effort to keep up with Yuri's rapid stride.

"Uncle Yuri, will they find him?"

"How do I know, Valya... If the major said he'll look for him you can be sure he'll do his best..."

"Uncle Yuri, I'm going to hunt for him too."

"Now don't be silly. We can't have you roaming around, you might step on a mine, or get knocked down by a truck..."

"Won't you let me?"

"I should say not. And don't let me hear anything about it any more..."

For a few days Valya went about miserable, replied in monosyllables when spoken to and sat apart, her short brows knitted. One morning she was missing from the dugout. She had run away. It was clear that she had gone to search for Mikhei. The men were quite upset about the business. Damn it, the kid would perish for sure. Grisha went to the village and asked whether anyone had seen her. Some said they had noticed her near Matryona's cottage, others said she had questioned them about Mikhei, but where she had gone after that no one knew.

About three days later Valya stole into the camp like a guilty pup, unkempt, scratched and grimy. No one scolded her or asked her any questions, they were merely stern with her and that was all. Valya slept for nearly 24 hours at a stretch, ate her fill and was gone again the following morning.

One woman, the wife of a local Communist who returned about this time with her two children to her wrecked home told

her neighbours (and within an hour her two little boys had rushed off to the woods and told the whole story to Grisha the chauffeur) that about fifteen kilometres from the village on the road she had met Matryona's girl who had told her all her troubles. "Such a clever little thing," the woman said, "she said she was sure Mikhei must be hiding somewhere on some army work. 'I'll go to all the road-building jobs, Aunt Stepanida,' she had said, 'and where the anti-tank ditches are being built and I'll look into the faces of all the workers ...' We had a good cry together. I gave her a crust of bread and off she went...."

"Uncle Yuri, Uncle Yuri, get up quickly and come with me...."

Yuri sighed deeply and opened his eyes. The dawn glimmered faintly through the tiny window of the dugout. Valya was standing beside his cot touching his face.

"Ah, it's you.... Hallo.... You're a bad little girl.... What do you have to wake me for?"

"I want you to take me to the major.... Uncle Yura, I've found him."

Her voice had a curious ring to it. Yuri still half asleep pulled on his boots, belted his tunic and smoothed his unruly forelock....

"You don't say! So you've found him, eh?"

"Aha.... I'll tell you all about it when we get there. Only do hurry."

They found the major rolled up in his army coat sleeping on two benches pushed together and with his brief case for a pillow. Valya began pouring out her story without waiting for him to shake off sleep and sit down at his desk.

"I walked all of two hundred kilometres, but I found him finally.... You know what, he's gone and shaved his moustache

and beard! He looks so different nobody could ever have recognized him but me. . . ."

Some time later the major and Valya drove over to the place where the road wrecked by the Germans was being mended. Valya stood in the open car staring fixedly ahead. Presently she raised her hand and turned and whispered to the major: "Here. . . ."

They halted in front of a bent figure of a man breaking stones. He was covered with lime dust, his head was wrapped in a shawl and the feet set far apart were bound in rags. When the car stopped he raised his head and narrowed his eyes so that his clean-shaven short-nosed face puckered up as if he had looked up into a blinding light. . . .

"That's him!" cried Valya, pointing her finger at him.

"What's the trouble?" the man asked hoarsely as the major came up to him. "My papers? Here you are. . . . In perfect order. . . ." And casting a brief piercing look at the little girl beside the major, bent down again and resumed his work.

"Your name is Pavlov, Alexei Demyanovich, and you were born in 1913? Is that right?" asked the major (Valya's cold little hand seized his and pressed it tight).

"That's right. Pavlov, Alexei Demyanovich," replied the other without raising his head. "Why, what's the trouble?"

"The trouble, my friend, is that your passport was issued by the German commandant's office. . . ."

The man shook his head slowly and gave a dry laugh.

"You can't frighten me, comrade. My passport was issued me by the Smolensk militia. I'm a refugee from Smolensk, a war invalid." Suddenly he assumed a whining tone. . . . "It's a dog's life. I tell you. . . . Breaking stones all day with nothing to eat. . . . I shed my blood for the Soviet power, and this is all the thanks I get."

The major had been silent until then but when the man began whining he pulled out his revolver:

"Get up!" The man unwillingly rose and flung down his hammer. "Hands up!" (The major felt his pockets.) "Now get into that car. . . ."

Mikhei did not stick to his story for long. Recognized at once by witnesses he broke down and confessed.

"Under the Germans I was drunk practically all the time, at first from joy and later because my damn conscience wouldn't give me any peace. . . . I don't deny I met the Germans with bread and salt, I was fed up with the Soviet power and I thought that under the Germans I would begin to live, you understand, live! But they fooled me and I wish you would give me a chance to say so over the radio so that everyone should hear. . . . At first I went to work for them willingly, yes, willingly, as a sort of actor. . . . It was quite a sport to trap some stubborn muzhik into telling me what he really thought, the fool. He wouldn't trust me and he tried to hide his opinions from me but I would see right through him as if he was transparent, and I'd force him to speak. . . . The Soviet power had no use for me but now I was appreciated at last. But when my muzhiks began to be picked up and taken to the Gestapo and when I heard them screaming in there, I got scared at what I had done. But it was too late. I wanted to kill myself. But again vodka and fear of the black-coats prevented me. . . . Terrible people those black-coats. And from there I slid right down to the bottom. . . . Something snapped inside me and I was done for. You can ask me whatever you like, I'll tell you everything. I can tell you things that would make your hair stand on end. . . ."

For several nights in succession he told stories of how the Gestapo had tortured and executed Russian people. He showed the investigators the grave where the bodies of the tortured victims had been buried, showed the instruments of torture the Germans had buried in the school cellar: the brazier, the iron hooks that had been used to hang people by the ribs, the rubber

hoses with which they had beaten their victims, the wooden needles they forced under nails. . . .

He spoke about these tortures in an even voice, giving a detailed description as dispassionately as though he were talking about some slaughter house for cattle. . . .

"I witnessed many of those tortures," he muttered and covered his eyes. And suddenly he fell onto the floor and began pawing at the floor. "There it is, there's the blood, see it?" And he kissed the earthen floor.

"That will do. You are disgusting enough as it is," said the officer who was conducting the investigation. Later in the cell he asked the prisoner: "Mikhei Nepei, when you worked for the Germans, did it never occur to you that you were betraying the Russian people, that you were betraying your country?"

"It did indeed. . . . But after all, thinking of your country won't fill your belly. You've got to think of yourself sometimes too. . . ."

The case was perfectly clear as far as the tribunal was concerned. In the presence of the inhabitants of the village of Vladimirskeye who packed the school hall and the street outside, the court sentenced Mikhei Ivanovich Nepei to death by hanging. When the judge pronounced the sentence, Mikhei, standing erect with his arms hanging straight at his sides, did not even blink and the expression on his beardless, bristly, slightly puffed face with its low forehead did not change.

A murmur of approval of the sentence rose from the hall and at once hundreds of hands applauded the verdict and a woman cried out bitterly:

"Hanging's too good for that scoundrel. . . Too good for him. He ought to be skinned alive. . . ."

The next morning the whole village assembled again, this time beside the gallows—two short poles with a crosspiece. Mikhei appeared escorted by four Red Armymen. He dragged

his feet and his head was bowed. The judge read out the sentence again. Mikhei was led over to the stool. He tried to resist but he was seized and lifted onto it. Whereupon he himself helped to slip the noose over his head. His flat, whitish eyes were filled with hate and a hateful leer parted his mouth with its worn teeth. . . .

Valya, standing quite close to him, cried out, her little hands clenched:

"Don't you dare laugh. . . . You must scream the way my mother screamed. . . ."



